

By Sir_Brilliant

Book 0

End's Beginning

Chapter 1

Stepping off the broken walkway of the UNSC Gettysburg onto the spotless, flat floor, his green armor reflecting off the ground, the Master Chief extended his hand. Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood shook it, disregarding the almost impervious armor with encased the Master Chief's body.

"Permission to come aboard, sir."

The smile on the admiral's face showed immense joy. "Permission granted. It's good to have you back, Master Chief."

"Good to be home, sir." Images of Reach immediately came to mind, blocking his view of the soldiers standing near the exit of the landing bay. It was his true home. Reach, which was glassed by the covenant only two weeks before, not including the warped space-time effects of the crystal they found on Reach and destroyed. Most of his team was on the planet at the time, including Spartans -104, -058, and -043; Fred, Linda, and Will, respectively. Looking up, he saw them coming aboard and greeting the Admiral.

So many more of them were killed on Reach, and each of their faces flashed before him. As the leader of the Spartan II's, every fallen comrade was a lost part of himself, yet he never showed it. It was his duty to stand tall and strong, never wavering. He would never forget Chief Petty Officer Mendez' last words to him, and he would never disobey those orders.

"Master Chief," the admiral said, grabbing his attention. "Your armor's looking a little, well... beat. How about you give that suit in so we can fix it up?"

"Yes sir." It was strange, now that John thought about it, leaving his Mjolnir Battlesuit. The half-ton jade-green armor had been a second skin for him, one that had saved him numerous times. And in the last week, the only parts he had taken off were the gauntlets and helmet, simply to eat and drink. Chances are without the armor, he wouldn't be alive to think about it.

The idea of taking it off was both considerable and unpleasant. John wanted to walk freely, breathe normal air, and use only his own faculties. Yet it had grown on him, always comfortable, regardless of anything that happened in the surrounding environment. Every movement only required a single thought, and the armor moved his body at incredible speed. Perhaps a short time out of it would be best.

Just then, the admiral walked past John, a smile creeping across his face. "I don't believe it," he said in shock and sarcasm. His mouth gaped then closed, only to show all his teeth in a pearly smile.

Sergeant A.J. Johnson saluted the admiral, standing straight, both feet together. "Reporting for duty, sir!" Admiral Hood returned the salute, watching the dark man's cold face become a full-fledged grin. He embraced Johnson, both patting each other's backs.

"Damned good to see you, Johnson! Didn't expect I'd see you here."

"Well, if you thought the Covenant would get poor old Sergeant Johnson, then surprise."

"Glad to hear it." They both laughed, obviously knowing each other, and they headed for the door. Admiral Hood turned back as the doors opened behind him, facing John. "Master Chief, get some rest. That's an order. These men will show you to your quarters, and you'll be debriefed at 1500 hours."

"Aye aye, sir."

Johnson and Hood walked out the door, but before the door closed, John smiled at what he heard from the good sergeant. "Damn lordy, you give them too much time off! Keep it up and they'll sleep through the whole war!"

Pulling up his sweat pants, there was a knock on the door to Spartan - 117's quarters. He tied the waistband and yelled across the room. "Enter!" and the doors opened, allowing in three officers, all ranked respectably enough. They walked in one by one, the front soldier speaking. "Sir, we're here to take your-"

John entered from the other room, looking at the gaping mouths stare at him. To them, seeing a Spartan, the greatest of soldiers, was an honor in itself. But what they saw was inhuman, at least in their opinion. He walked right up to them, scanning each of their faces as they blankly stared at him. Wearing a military grade tank top revealed his arms, which seemed to be covered in muscles, all which bulged out. The officer in front couldn't understand how they all managed to fit on one arm. And the clothes he dropped off were all extra extra large, as requested, yet still were skin tight

on this behemoth.

Yet over all his physique was his pasty skin, almost completely white. Living almost exclusively within the confines of his Mjolnir armor, John's skin rarely saw direct sunlight, making his body produce a laughable amount of melanin. He didn't mind too much, but was occasionally reminded of his tanned self before the Mjolnir days.

"Yes?" The three snapped to attention.

"Sir! We were ordered to take your armor to the Science lab, s-sir."

"That won't be necessary. I'll take it there myself."

The Petty officers looked at each other. The one on John's left spoke up.

"Sir, that armor weighs more than half a ton."

He grabbed a huge bag and hefted it like a feather. "I could use the light exercise." They paused, watching the bag, thinking there was no way it could hold the Mjolnir armor within. The soldier in the back, at least a head above the other two, stepped forward.

"May I?" John handed him the bag, and as he let go, the man fell to the floor, the bag anchoring him to it. Hoisting it again, John helped the fallen man to his feet, saluted, and left the room, running out of site.

Jogging down the long corridor, every officer gave a quick glance at John and returned to their business. A few women officers eyed him, watching him longer. But seconds after he ran past each person a barrage of air came through, simply from his slow pace of 15 kilometers per hour. He slowed down from 25 after hearing a woman scream from her dress flying up.

Each step was quiet, even though the bag more than tripled his weight. Just as a drop of sweat formed above his forehead, he heard light footsteps in the passageway beside his. 20 meters ahead they would connect, and he'd meet up with another Spartan.

Listening closely, he tried to identify whose footsteps they were, simply to test himself, and maybe even for fun. The softness of each step meant it couldn't be Fred, and the smaller whisper of air wouldn't match with Will's physique. The corridor ended and John came face to face with his hypothesis.

Linda.

They both smiled to each other and scanned each other thoroughly in a moment. Linda was wearing the same garb as John, perhaps a size smaller. Her red hair was kept in a pony tail, staying airborne almost constantly. Her right arm was black and blue, still healing from plasma burns covering

it.

John wondered if he'd see Fred and Will along the way. Both of them had minor leg injuries and were told not to put much force on them, but the Spartans didn't usually listen to sound medical advice. They also normally wore their Mjolnir armor, which made even dire injuries seem like scratches.

Turning left, a sign overhead read Science Lab 3, and the two slowed down and walked to the doors. They were locked, and John hit the intercom system. A moment passed, and a voice came through.

"This Science lab is a restricted area. What business do you have?" The automated voice showed no quarter, and John intended to give none.

"Spartans -117 and -058 reporting as ordered to bring our Mjolnir battle armor." The doors opened seconds later and the two entered. Tools scattered the lab, as well as unopened crates, boxes and tables carrying everything. The floor was barely noticeable except for a small walkway to a lighted room where several familiar voices emerged.

Walking in, John saw Fred and Will in wheelchairs, Cortana's holographic image displayed across from them, and a scientist in a white coat.

Cortana's image faced John, with her hands on her hips. "Sleep well?"

"Fine, no thanks to you." An electric charge rippled across her body and a smirk broke out on her face. He gave a quick nod to Fred and Will, and looked over to the woman in the white coat. Her back was still to them.

"I'll be with you in a minute."

Linda walked to John's left side, looking at Fred and Will's wheelchairs.

"Comfy?"

"No complaints", Fred replied. "It's always nice to have some wheels."

John turned back to the entrance of the lab, noticing two sets of black marks on the floor.

"Fun race?"

"Couldn't be better." The smile on Will's face meant he was the victor. Only then did the white-coat turn to them.

"It's good to have you with us, Spartan -117 and -058", she said in a slight British accent. "You two can leave those on that table over there", pointing to one at their right. She then looked sternly at Fred and Will.

"You may be the most decorated soldiers in the UNSC, but this is still a military installation. I hope you don't do anything like that again.

"Ma'am, we were just getting our exercise."

Her face turned red and she opened her mouth to reply, but John cut her off. "If there isn't anything else, we'll be leaving now." She closed her mouth, and turned back to work quickly. Will shrugged, and they left the

lab.

The doors closed abruptly behind them, and they waited there, not knowing exactly what to do. This is the first time they were fully rested and fed since the Covenant attacked Reach, without any orders or missions to fulfill. John looked at the others, seeing beads of sweat on their foreheads. “Looks like we’re a bit out of shape. Let’s find the gym.”

Chapter 2

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 2

0500 October 20, 2552(Military Time)/Cairo Super Mac Station
Sol System

Science leader Master Gunnery Sergeant Ganz held both hands out in front of him, desperately wishing to explain himself as the Master Chief stared directly into his eyes. The rest of the Spartans stood still, each holding a different piece of their Mjolnir armor, ready to put them on, but hesitant to do so.

The Master Chief didn't show anger, but Ganz knew better than to take any chances. "Why isn't my armor ready?"

"Sir, your Mark VI upgrades to the original battle-armor haven't been completed because of the tremendous amount of damage it had taken. There were several damaged core systems, and a few were completely destroyed. The rest of your team also received upgrades and minor repairs while on Reach, unlike you. Anyways, all that was only a minor setback and it should be finished within the hour."

Standing still for a moment, the Master Chief nodded, allowing Ganz to give out a sigh of relief under his breath. It wasn't his fault that the work wasn't done. Resources had been spread thin since the UNSC had called all ships back to Earth, with shipyards taking much of the required metals and essential parts necessary. And on top of that, he hadn't been given the manpower needed to complete the repairs or the time to do it himself. Hell, I haven't even cleaned this room yet. Still littered with crap from labs seven and twelve.

"Inform me immediately when you've completed the repairs."

"Aye aye, sir." The Master Chief turned his attention to his Spartans, who still awaited directions. He nodded to them, and they continued to put their armor on.

"We'll get out of your way." He rose and exited the science lab, as Ganz turned back to the cluttered table, holding the unfinished armor. This is gonna be a long hour.

John walked out of science lab three when Cortana's image appeared on

the console to the right of the doors. She held out her arms in a questioning gesture. "Chief, where's the tux?"

"Still undergoing repairs. It should be done within the hour."

"Ahh, I see." John knew that there was more to Cortana's starting of this conversation than just small talk. Even though he didn't know much about the workings of an AI, he had learned long ago from Cortana that she never wasted a moment, let alone a sentence. There was some reason behind this little conversation.

"What is it Cortana?"

"Well, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but two of our Slipspace probes just sent back signals of Covenant ships converging on Earth. Their signals have also been lost, meaning that the signal is jammed, or the probes have been destroyed."

His eyes widened for an instant as John edged closer to the console. "How much time?"

"By my calculations, I'd say between 60-70 minutes. The entire UNSC fleet is preparing to engage a force the size of the one we saw at the Unyielding Hierophant. Of course, everything is being kept quiet for the time being, and the medal ceremony will continue as scheduled."

Adrenaline pumped and his mind raced, as all John could think of was what he and his Spartans would be doing when the Covenant arrived. The medal ceremony, honoring Captain Keyes, Sergeant Johnson, and himself, was still held, meaning that he'd need to situate himself immediately as it had finished. He will need to make sure the rest of the Spartans would be ready for the coming attack. "Give me this stations Schematics."

"Yes, one moment-" Cortana's holographic image disappeared and was replaced by a picture of the Cairo Station, showing all decks. John studied it for a few seconds, when the rest of the Spartans came through the doors in their normal garb. "-done. A thank you would be in order." Several soldiers ran by, heading towards the weapons cache.

"Are there any orders to secure positions onboard the Cairo?"

"Yes, we're sending marines to various locations-"

"Get me in contact with Lord Hood."

"Chief, may I remind you that this is classified information, and I only told you because I knew you'd want me to tell you, and if our positions were switched, you would do the same."

"Did you say something?" He smirked while Cortana stayed silent for a moment longer.

"Oh, I see. Contact with Lord Hood, coming up." The Cairo's image dissipated and the Spartans waited, only to hear the Admiral's voice break

the silence.

“Something I can do for you, Master Chief?”

“All Spartans are prepared for active duty, sir.”

“I see.”

“There have been several troop movements that my team and I have noticed, and they seem to be preparing for something. We are ready to assist.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Report to the bridge, Master Chief.”

Admiral Hood stood still on the bridge, checking the information again. It couldn’t be right, could it?

“Cortana, is it possible that our probes are wrong. That they are undergoing technical difficulties?”

“I show a one to one million probability that such is possible. On top of that, after their last transmission, we stopped receiving signals from them, meaning that they were probably destroyed or that their signal has been blocked.”

Now starting to pace, the admiral said, “I guess we knew this day would come. Hell, some would even say that we’re lucky we’ve had this much time, but it wasn’t enough.” Cortana watched him pace, listening to every transmission of the preparing fleet, as well as running the Cairo single-handedly. She was running at only half her capacity, and now that her memory core had been cleared of all information from Halo, that was half of her full processing power.

Now she felt as though the world moved slower, and it was a wondrous feeling. Calculations took nanoseconds; the passing of any and all information was practically instant. Even her speech had sped up. Admiral Hood had already ordered her to slow down twice, simply because she was incomprehensible.

“Cortana, do we know how many ships they have?”

“Negative. We lost the probe’s signal before they could transmit any information about the size of the fleet.”

“Estimate.”

Cortana turned her head to the side, not expecting the question. “Sir, it’s impossible to determine. With no info on it, they could have tens to hundreds for all we know.” Lord Hood already knew that, but after reading Cortana’s and the Master Chief’s reports on the Unyielding Hierophant and the size of the fleet with it, he knew chances were there were more.

“Cortana, give me a battle simulation of a Covenant Fleet the size you

encountered with the Unyielding Hierophant.”

“Yes sir.” Cortana was replaced by a visual representation of the Covenant fleet converging on Earth. The entire UNSC fleet, as well as the Super Mac Stations looked pitiful in comparison.

“Just give me the results Cortana.” There was a strange pause, making Lord Hood worry what it was Cortana had found.

“Sir, I calculate a total loss of all UNSC forces, both here and groundside. That includes the use of the minefield and the Super Mac Stations.”

Lord Hood dropped his head, not knowing what to say or do. This was a losing battle, a lost war. He never wanted to admit this day would come, but now...

No! I cannot give in! There would be a way; there always was. It was just a matter of finding it. “Cortana, what was the damage done to the Covenant fleet?”

“I estimate losses up to 60%, with a 5% error ratio. Sir, if I may point out to you, there is probably a plan devised by ONI in case of a situation like this occurs.”

“Yes, you’re right. There should be some strategy in case earth is attacked. Send a message to High Command and find out what it is.”

“Understood. Message sent. Sir, incoming transmission from the Master Chief.”

“Put him through. - Something I can do for you, Master Chief?”

“All Spartans are prepared for active duty, sir.”

As Cortana’s image reappeared, Hood gave raised an eyebrow to her. “I see.”

“There have been several troop movements that my team and I have noticed, and they seem to be preparing for something. We are ready to assist.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Report to the bridge, Master Chief.” He knew that the Master Chief was an expert strategist, as well as one of the finest soldiers in the UNSC. His advice would be valuable. The circumstances of his call was in question, however.

“Cortana, do you know anything about how the Chief...”

She let out a sigh, a strangely human attribute she had, saying “Sir, I gave him the info. I felt that it was necessary.”

“I understand that, but from now on, just ask beforehand.”

“Aye, sir.” But why should she? Protocol doesn’t seem to matter anymore. He shook his head, straightened his back and stood tall. Of course it matters. It matters because we will fight down to the last man standing, and we’ll fight them so hard that they’ll lose their taste for war.

Staring at the screen on the wall of his quarters, John scanned the list of people involved in the Spartan II program. Each name and face was one of a fallen comrade, each showing them as MIA. From the start of the program, all Spartans that were killed in battle never actually died; to keep morale high, they were simply known to be MIA, and soon to return.

He scrolled down the list and stopped on one name. The picture and name brought a wave of memories, more than any other, as he saw Sam. Sam had been his best childhood friend, until his death in 2525.

“Sir, your armor’s fixed and ready.” John’s mind returned to consciousness instantly, and looked up, hearing the radio signal. “You should come and pick it up, and I’ll explain all the new systems put in.”

“Affirmative. Be there in 3.”

“I’ll be ready. Ganz out.” His image flickered off just as the door closed behind John. He ran at half speed, which had increased quite a bit from all the training he’d been doing over the past month. The normally littered halls were empty, all personnel at their posts awaiting the coming attack. As he picked up the pace, John contemplated the battle. What could he do? As a ground soldier, a space battle held no place for him, but he intended to be part of it. There were several things he could do; infiltrating and taking control of a Covenant ship and use it against them seemed like the most obvious choice. He remembered Reach, where most of the Covenant capital ships stayed out of range of the Super Mac Guns until they took out their power stations groundside. They may do the same, trying to take out the ones orbiting the Earth, making him stay on the station to defend the Cairo.

Knowing that there was no way to know what his specific orders would be, he began thinking of the upcoming battle, and its likely outcome. For some reason, he had never thought of it before, probably due to his constant training, never allowing himself any quiet time to think, only to do. Now he knew why.

This battle seemed hopeless. Even considering that he and his Spartans had performed some amazing feats, this was an entirely different situation. The Covenant could not be caught off guard, and they would not give in under any circumstances. Will I see Sam again?

No! John thought to himself. This wasn’t a fight for rules, for dominance, or for any reason humans have ever fought for before. This was a fight for survival, not just of a group, religion, or race, but of the entire human species. And they would never give up. Oh, here’s the lab.

Entering, John saw Master Ganz turn towards him. “That was quick. Here,

follow me.” Ganz brought him to the next room over, where he saw his shiny metallic armor. Its green glow was majestic, the helmet reflecting his image perfectly, not a spot on it.

He put on the battle-suit and picked up his helmet, when Ganz showed a burnt piece of equipment, and dropped it on the table in front of him. “The plating was about to fail, there’s viscosity throughout the gel layer. Optics; totally fried. And let’s not even talk about the power supply. You know how expensive this gear is son?”

John turned the helmet until it gave a reassuring click. System schematics appeared on his helmet and faded out when he looked back at Ganz. “Tell that to the Covenant.”

Fred didn’t like this. He didn’t like it at all. Being split up from the rest of the Spartans was one thing that he truly loathed. But John ordered it, and even though he hated the idea, he knew it was the best chance they had. Sent to the lowest part of the station, Fred commanded all marines in the area, while Linda and Will controlled the middle of the station, and John stayed up near the bridge. The Covenant armada was tiny, one of the smallest ever seen. Long-range sensors only detected 15 capital ships, all out of range of the Super Mac guns. But as expected, dropships were coming towards them, heading for the Cairo, Athens, and Malta. The Covenant wanted to take the Super Mac guns out, and it was his job to make sure that didn’t happen.

Listening to the frequency given to him by Cortana, he heard transmissions warning of Covenant dropships attaching to certain sections of the Cairo. Cortana sent a quick private message to Fred. “Chief, you’ve got 3 dropships coming directly to you. They’ll hit the hull in 90 seconds.” “Affirmative.” He closed the channel and turned on his external speakers. “Marines, spread out and take firing positions around the bulkhead. I don’t want any of those covenant bastards stepping foot on this station.” “With pleasure, sir,” an Australian accented marine yelled out. They made a perimeter around the room, taking up firing positions. A chaingun was set up at the end of the room as a dropship came into view. “Here they come!”

The room shook when the dropship attached to the hull, and sparks flew off of it. Fred grabbed a BR55 assault rifle and aimed high for the heads of the Elites who would come out first. He knew that it was their honor to go into battle first, an honor he supported heartily. “Prepare to fire!”

The sparks stopped and a loud bang shuddered through the room as the wall started to give way. Another bang moved the half-meter thick

titanium-A, and Fred looked into his auto-zoom scope. The last one gave way, as the titanium landed on the floor throwing off everyone's aim momentarily except for Fred's. Two Elites jumped out and all marines opened fire. Fred let off a three bullet burst, two puncturing the first Elite's head. The second lived only a moment longer, standing under a rain of bullets from the chaingun.

Fred unclipped two grenades from his belt, one in each hand, and took out the pins with his thumbs. He tossed both into the dropship and they exploded violently moments later. Holding up a hand for the marines to hold position, Fred took hold of his pistol and jumped inside the ship, making sure it was clear. Turning on his helmet light, he saw something he'd never seen before, and hesitated at the sight.

A Grunt laid on its back, clutching one arm and shaking. With an open wound on its leg and arm, it was in no condition to fight them, nor did it have the capability, all extra firearms scattered away from it. Fred kept his finger on the trigger, but felt some mercy for this creature.

Carrying it out on his shoulder, he jumped down and handed the Grunt to one of the marines. "Take it down to R&D. They might find it useful."

"Yes sir." As he ran off, Cortana's voice cut through.

"Chief, head to the loading dock. You're taking a trip."

The Admiral began pacing again, forced to simply wait while his forces fought off the Covenant attacking the station. "Cortana, status report."

Cortana's image appeared from the console port in front of him.

"We have three damages vessels, one destroyed, and the rest are green. 80% of all boarding parties aboard the Cairo have been eliminated, as well as 50% on the Athens and 30% on the Malta." He stopped pacing and stroked his chin, glancing at the screen showing the tactical situation.

"I think its time we help out the other stations. Cortana, send the other three Spartans off this station, one to the Athens and the other two to the Malta."

"Aye, sir." Cortana radioed Fred's, Will's, and Linda's comm. signal.

"Chief, head to the loading dock. You're taking a trip." She then opened a channel to the Malta. "Malta, what is your status, over."

"I don't believe it! They're retreating, we won!" the emphatic officer yelled over the radio. Suddenly, Cortana detected a massive energy spike, and her visual receptors showed the Malta explode.

"What the hell just happened to the Malta, Cortana", yelled Lord Hood. Every pathway in her electronic mind filled to capacity, trying to understand what had happened. "Analyzing." Cortana had only two facts:

the Malta exploded and that all Covenant forces fled just before it had exploded. Therefore, it must be a...

Another large energy spike drove Cortana away from the thought, and her sensors found no trace of the Athens. "Cortana, assessment."

"That explosion came from inside the Athens, same as the Malta. The Covenant must have brought something with them-a bomb."

"Then they sure as hell brought one here." He checked if the Master Chief had been connected to that frequency, and he was. "Chief, find it." He closed the channel, and spoke directly to Cortana. "Cortana, find that bomb. And where are the other Spartans?"

"They are on Longsword 35, now 3 minutes away the Cairo."

"Then they're no help to us now."

Cortana reopened the channel to the Master Chief, knowing that he would need the information she had. "Sir, boarders have breached the fire control center. They have a bomb."

"Can you diffuse it?"

"Yes, but I'll need the Chief's help to make contact with the detonator."

"Chief, get to the bomb double time. Cortana, prioritize targets and fire at will."

The admiral of Earth's orbital defense fleet confirmed Cortana's priority targets. "First echelon, you're with me, blanket those cruisers, take them out one by one. Second echelon, keep those carriers busy."

Cortana screamed across the bandwidth. "The carriers are breaking through sir! Their heading straight for the Cairo."

Lord Hood immediately took action, knowing that those carriers needed to be stopped, or the Cairo could be gone without the bomb's help.

"Cortana, concentrate your fire on the first carrier. Admiral, do what you can on the second."

"Everyone, form up! Follow my lead!"

Cortana gave a puzzled look to Lord Hood, rechecking her calculations.

"The first carrier completely ignored us, sir, blew through the Malta's debris field, and headed straight for Earth."

Hood opened his eyes wide, with slight disbelief. Then it made sense to him. The Covenant would never send that carrier here if they were planting a bomb! "Cortana, reroute the Spartan's Longsword to that carriers LZ."

"Yes sir. Targeting all remaining Covenant ships." Cortana's sensors blared as the Master Chief entered the elevator shaft connected to the room where the Covenant had planted the bomb. She scanned the room, finding five Elites. She keyed the Master Chief's radio. "Just so you know, there are quite a few Elites guarding the bomb. You might need to get creative."

Chapter 3

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 3

9th age of Reclamation (2nd age of Halo?)
High Charity, Holy Suite of the Prophet of Truth

Sitting a meter off the ground, the Prophet of Truth leaned back in his hovering seat as a Brute messenger left the room. It had just relayed a message from the Prophet Regret, stating the finding of a second Halo and its glory. Regret had, however, gone to the Holy World in his youth-bound haste, and possibly jeopardized their entire Covenant. That was Truth's response, yet it was a lie.

The original intentions Truth carried were simple: find the locations of the three holy worlds, secure their artifacts, and in turn receive powers of a deity. Finding the first Halo had changed this simple plan drastically, but its destruction kept him from his 'duty' to activate the ring. Truth found this to be of no concern, yet Regret, the Prophet of Mercy and the High Council, considered Halo to be of the highest priority. He kept his tongue steady and his thoughts to himself, but was relieved by its destruction. Still, it was necessary for all to believe his deep sorrow for its loss, as well as being strong and continuing to lead the Covenant along their original path. Not to be arrogant, Truth knew that his actions were flawless, and that none believed otherwise. There had been more problems occurring as well, and he pondered them meticulously.

His first was the addition of the Jiralhanae to the Covenant. They were possibly the greatest instrument he had ever encountered, and wished for their inclusion into the Covenant. Regret and Mercy agreed, but knew nothing of his intentions. The Jiralhanae had all the traits of the Sangheili and more. He wished to rid of the Sangheili.

The Jiralhanae were a strong and powerful race, each one carrying immense physical strength, as well as being quite intelligent. They feared none but the Hierarchs, and drank every word Truth had spoken. The Sangheili, however, had been the foundation of the Covenant from its birth. They had always been the Prophet's protectors, and were always thought to be the perfect warriors. Fast, powerful, and incredible strategists, they rarely failed. But they were held too dearly in the Covenant, and held too

much power within it.

There must be some way to rid them of this power, Truth thought. But the council will not stand for it, and neither will Regret and Mercy. There must be some way to discredit the Sangheili.

Truth stroked the beard-like tendrils hanging from his chin as he searched for a possible solution. Turning towards the window, the blackness of Slipspace relaxed him. A single thought stood out: Halo, their new destination. High Charity would be arriving at any moment. Then the window showed a new picture, making Truth's face harden.

The rough voice of a Brute broke his thoughts, echoing through the room. "Honored Prophet, the Prophet of Regret sends a distress signal, urging for help."

Intriguing. "What for?"

"His lordship states the humans and their Demon have trapped him and are preparing an attack."

How ludicrous a statement! How could these Humans possibly harm him if the Honor Guard is at his disposal?! Truth turned back to the window when an idea struck him. "Regret requires no assistance. Pull our forces from the area and send them in search of the Index. The Honor Guard are more than a match for any foe."

"Understood." Truth could have never anticipated the Demon a participant in his grand design for power, let alone be a necessary part of it. If it could kill Regret, it would kill two birds with one stone: Regret would be gone and Truth would have a reason to remove the Sangheili from their positions in the Honor Guard. A bold step, yet necessary for his success. If his plan worked, all left to complete was riding of Mercy and the High Council.

But what of the Sangheili? They will surely protest, but would they resign the High Council, even leave the Covenant? It was a strong possibility, one that Truth would not rule out. They may even attempt rebellion against the Covenant. When the time is right, an attack on them will catch them off guard, allowing me to retrieve the last artifact from the final holy world. And by that time, it will be too late for all who oppose this holy Covenant. All who oppose me.

Chapter 4

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 4

Second age of Halo Aboard the Duty's Pride

Captain Quavar Noiz turned from the viewport and adjusted his left gauntlet, which was still tight and hadn't fit perfectly yet. He stood proudly on his bridge, knowing his quick promotion was meant to be. It was a dream come true, to command such a vessel as the Duty's Pride, a long living and powerful machine. Its many years of service have brought much honor to all who served on it.

"Captain", his communications officer said, "we are receiving a message from the flagship."

"Put it through." The holocron projected the image of a Jiralhanae Supreme Commander, immediately bringing a bitter taste to his mouth. How a Jiralhanae could command the flagship, I will never understand.

"Supreme Commander," he said curtly.

The Jiralhanae snorted, making Noiz cringe. "Noiz, we're going to station here for some time. Go join fleet three's cluster and await orders."

"Understood." The image cut off and he sat back into his seat and reclined. "Helm, take us there." The gentle pull of the ship moved all aboard slightly back as it accelerated, then relaxed as the acceleration stabilizers reversed the polarity. The situation did not feel right, but Noiz was bound to follow orders, regardless of what gave them.

This certain situation, however, seemed out of place. High Charity had arrived several cycles before, all vessels swarming the sacred ring in search of its key. He, on the other hand, had been held behind together with hundreds of other ships. Yet all wished to participate in finding of Halo's Index, as well as receiving the honor of merely stepping foot on Halo's holy ground. And for no given reason, they were abstained from that Honor.

"Time to destination?"

The Sangheili at the helm turned, his red armor reflecting light off to all angles. "30 seconds."

"Connect me with Commander Deewaes." This predicament was

unwelcome to Noiz, and he dared not deal with it lacking any knowledge. The holocron came back to life, this time with the face of an old friend.

“Captain Noiz”, the deep yet quiet voice spoke, “your new armor suits you well. Is there a necessary reason behind this reunion?”

Noiz frowned, seeing his former teacher and captain prove once again to be much wiser and more cunning than himself, as his experience held almost no equal. “Unfortunately, yes. Why have we been stationed here, along with the rest of the fleet?”

“I had been informed that Halo may receive orbital bombardment, and that this cluster needed to be out of range from any residual explosions or unseen errors that may occur. This however, seems foolish to me, or perhaps simply a ruse. But I dare not say more.”

As Deewaes looked down, Noiz nodded agreeably. “This is a questionable position we have been put in, and our guard cannot be let down. Perhaps our shields should be raised, and our weapons powered.”

“No”, he shook his head, “doing so will only force the others to question our actions. We could be seen as a possible threat. We must first contact the others and find reason behind this. But do not act with haste. Tread lightly, for what we speak may be considered heresy to all ignorant of our intent.

“Agreed. I shall begin at once.” He tapped the control pad near his left hand once, closing the transmission.

“Captain, we have reached our destination”, said the helm officer.

“Excellent.” He turned to his comm. officer. “Contact the other ships in the fleet and inquire of their situation.”

“Yes Captain.” What is happening here? Noiz rechecked the coordinates given by the Supreme Commander, and the sheer area of space meant for the entirety of the fleet was excessively inadequate for such a force, too small to keep ships at the proper distance away from each other. Too small. As several more cruisers and other vessels joined the fleet, Noiz was sure not all was well. His mind burned, knowing that any wrong move on his part could jeopardize his life, as well as those serving with him aboard the Duty’s Pride. Yet all he needed was proof. Proof and time.

“Sir”, the comm. officer said, bringing Noiz out of his thoughts, “all ships report the same as commander Deewaes, but most simply haven’t questioned the orders. I have been told to be weary of which direction we take with this exploration of yours, Captain.”

Noiz looked harshly at his comm. officer, but his face relaxed as he thought for a moment. “That was incredibly fast. Did you only speak with Sangheili?” He knew that any other race would speak slowly or waste

time in some other fashion, but that the Sangheili in general were extremely efficient.

The comm. officer turned to Noiz, then looked up, and back at him. "Yes, I believe I did. Curious."

"Indeed." Wait! Noiz jumped from his seat, his eyes turning from left to right quickly several times over. This could be the proof I need! "Quickly, take a census of all the Jiralhanae aboard the Duty's Pride and all other vessels in the cluster."

Knowing better than to question orders, the comm. officer tapped the illuminated console in front of him and gathered information. "Captain", he remarked in a confused manner, "there are no Jiralhanae aboard the Duty's Pride

"And the rest of the cluster?" Noiz' voice kept calm, but he shook within, not sure of the consequences of the current predicament for himself and the cluster. If he was right, they would all be in danger.

"One moment." A plan must be formulated. If there were an oncoming attack, his first priority was his ship and crew, but Noiz found the situation to be most dire, and could not bared responsibility for the entire fleet. I shall warn the cluster, raise all defense and weapons systems, and prepare for battle. But what then? Fight against our own? This seemed to rash, and yet it was no simple matter. And what of those in the cluster? Would they believe and follow my instructions? My intentions could be on the verge of heresy and could cause a war within our holy Covenant. What would happen then? "Captain, there are no Jiralhanae aboard any ship within the cluster."

Damned be those who wish war within the Covenant! "Send a message to Commander Deewaes telling him we have all the proof we need. Raise shields and charge all weapons immediately. Give me the status of all Covenant vessels outside the cluster. All hands to battle stations!" The quiet bridge transformed, now teeming with life and movement.

"Captain, several cluster vessels are contacting us about our raised shields and weapons systems."

"Captain, our sensors are being jammed. We cannot receive any readings from ships outside the cluster." Noiz slammed his fist into his console, bringing all on the bridge to utter silence.

"How are our sensors being jammed?"

"Unknown sir."

"Find out and fix it! We need those readings immediately. Use any means necessary!"

"Yes sir", grumbled the tactical officer. He knew he could hack into any

Covenant battleship, but it was still illegal and punishable by death. He also knew that by being ordered to do so by his superior officer he did not bear any blame, but the High Council often rid of those who followed such orders. And with this new captain, he wasn't sure what to do. But he obediently followed orders, reminding himself that it was his duty to do so. He did admit, however, that there was some personal interest in the matter.

"Captain, the other ships-"

"Do I look hard of hearing?"

"No sir. Please forgive my impatience. I only wished to remind-"

"No reminder was necessary. Continue to disregard all incoming transmissions except from Commander Deewaes." Noiz knew that he needed to appear strong and confident in front of his officers, or they would turn on him. And in this volatile situation, he kept wary of all around him. Such thoughts came only because he would have done the same. He pawed the dormant energy sword hanging on his waist, waiting for any and all who may oppose him.

"Captain", yelled his tactical officer, "Commander Deewaes' ship has just raised its shields and is charging all weapons. Wait-", he held his hand up, palm facing Noiz, and turned back to his console. "-one, no, two more vessels have done the same."

"Excellent." Noiz grinned, now totally confident of his original hypothesis, but at least his ship and three others were prepared for the oncoming attack.

"Captain, I'm in." The sudden pause made Noiz turn to his tactical officer, who continued to stare at his console. Finally, he said, "by the rings! Their weapons will discharge on our position momentarily!"

I must act quickly! "Open a channel to all vessels in the cluster. Evacuate this area immediately! We will be fired upon-" The Duty's Pride shook violently, thrusting all to one side then another. The front viewport showed the luminous purple laser of a heavy cruiser's planetary weaponry tear through the cluster like his own energy sword through human flesh.

"Evasive Maneuvers! Get us away from the cluster!"

As he continued to watch, his eyes widened as at least ten heavy cruisers and carriers were simply cut into pieces in a single blow. Such destruction, from one of our own! "Status report!"

"Shields holding at 67%, all other systems at optimum efficiency!"

"Status of all vessels in the cluster?"

"Out of 32 vessels, 17 were destroyed, eight are immobile, and the rest have only minor damage with few systems non-operational."

"Damned Jiralhanae! Their heresy will not last! Send a message to all able

vessels to form up in the following formation-” typing it into his hand console. “-use only the special Sangheili emergency frequency and jam all other signals. Prepare to fire on my command on the nearest attacking ship. Set coordinate vectors to an intercept course towards it, and send those coordinates to all cluster vessels. Mark all targets of opportunity and set them as hostile.”

The Duty’s Pride immediately turned left and accelerated, pulling Noiz farther into his seat. He took no notice, only waiting for the right moment to strike. “Are the other vessels following my instructions?”

“Yes captain, they all hold a steady course in the given formation.”

“Intercepting target in 30 seconds!”

“Prepare to launch all Seraph fighters and order them to launch and attack the flagship. Coordinate all other cluster vessels to send their Seraph fighters for the flagship as well, and to launch immediately. Order vessels in formation positions one and two to attack our target, and the rest to follow suit, all on my command.”

“Intercepting in 15 seconds!”

“More weapons discharging on us. Brace for impact!” The Duty’s Pride threw its crew roughly, many being pulled out of their stations. Sparks flew and the lights dimmed and flashed briefly, then returned to normal.

“We’ve lost all shields from that blast! Engines are down to 50% and we’ve lost weapons stations two and three! Another direct hit will destroy the Duty’s Pride! Ships in formations spaces six and thirteen have been incapacitated!”

“Hold steady course and prepare to fire.”

“Five seconds to intercept. Four, three, two,-”

“All ships, open fire!” Streaks of plasma cut through the blackness of space, lighting it as well as each target hit. Three enemy vessels’ shields flickered and died, and exploded only moments later, drifting dead in space.

“Sir, we are being targeted! Another blast will destroy us!”

“Engineering, give me full aft thrusters on my command.”

“Captain, this is engineering. All propulsion systems are running at 43% efficiency, and we won’t be able to dodge the fire.”

“Firing imminent!”

“Setup Slipspace jump to randomized coordinates. Prepare to jump.”

“Initializing Slipspace jump-”

“They’ve fired!” Noiz looked up and saw the plasma head straight towards the Duty’s Pride, and as he clenched his fists and jaw, it never connected. Upon opening his eyes, the viewport showed Commander

Deewaes' ship taking the brunt of the attack. Deewaes! "Sir, message coming through. It's Slipspace coordinates from Commander Deewaes, telling us to jump there immediately."

"We cannot leave this battle-" another bolt struck the ship, this time not being stopped by its shields. The plasma ripped through the ship and hit the Duty's Pride.

"Sir, multiple hull breaches and fires in decks 16 through 34. Hull integrity is down to 56%.

"All hands open fire on the nearest target. Change our Slipspace coordinates to those given by Commander Deewaes. Give me best speed possible."

"Another target down!" Unfortunately, this battle is already lost. We must escape, and give word of this heresy. "Sir, an enemy vessel has set a collision course with us. Impact in 20 seconds!"

"Start Slipspace Generators immediately. We must escape."

"Slipspace generators running. Opening Slipspace rift now." White light flooded the viewport as the multidimensional rift opened elegantly in front of them.

"Impact in ten seconds!"

"Helm, take us through." The ship creaked as it accelerated as best it could, and shook as it entered the new realm. As the rift closed behind the Duty's Pride, Noiz let out a short sigh of relief and sat normally into his seat. "Status."

"Weapons generators are overloaded, but backup generators are working at 50%. All shields are down, but will be up within the hour. Fires on decks 16 through 25 have been extinguished, but decks 26 through 34 have been compromised. Engines are now at 46%, and-" A jolt ran through the ship as another rift opened in front of them, and normal space became visible once again.

"What is this? Where are we?"

"According to my calculations captain, we are just behind the planet which Halo orbits.

No, is that possible? "Does that mean that the coordinates given by Commander Deewaes sent us through a loop in dimensions, bringing us here?"

"Yes captain."

"Can we be seen behind the planet?"

"I don't believe so, as long as no transmissions are sent out by us."

"Yes, I see. Interesting."

"Sir, incoming transmission. It's coming from Halo, on the Sangheili

emergency frequency.”

“Put it through.” The viewport changed from showing the planet and the face of the Special Operations Commander of the Covenant. He looked weary, but his eyes never looked away from the viewport.

“This message is for Sangheili only. The Jiralhanae have betrayed our Covenant, by the order of the Prophets. They have killed the High Council and the Arbiter, and are attacking our ships at this very moment. We cannot allow them to succeed. The Unggoy have joined us, and the Yanme’e Kig-Yar have already opposed us on several accounts. If any shall be in your path, strike them down, and show them no pity. Do not engage any Covenant battleship if it is not known who controls it, but do not show yourselves to any either. Be wary of all, and watch your backs well. Treachery has made this a hapless hour.”

The entire bridge crew watched in dismay, not knowing exactly what to make of the message. Then they looked at each other, and finally at Noiz. But he stared straight ahead, pondering what his next move would be.

“Take all of our enemies to the cells, and release them under no circumstances. I want this ship repaired and ready to enter battle within the hour. No excuses.”

Chapter 5

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 5

Ninth Age of Reclamation/First Age of Rebirth
Yielding Righteousness/ Current Flagship

The doors opened as the Arbiter walked into the Grand Chamber, seeing rows of his brethren. His Sangheili. They all uniformly kneeled, their heads bowed. The Arbiter turned to his Special operations commander, now the Supreme Commander, and said, "You never told me there would be this many."

"I thought you would like being surprised, Arbiter." He showed a grin, as best a Sangheili could.

They started walking through the main aisle, with an honor guard walking behind them for protection. The Arbiter felt that the presence of the honor guards was not necessary, but understood the honor they must feel to be here, especially now. As he walked past each row, all stood, alerted the Arbiter of some discrepancy. He turned his head left, and saw several rows of Lekgolo, their massive bodies gracefully rising as he passed. And further ahead, even more rows were filled with the small Unggoy, who fidgeted even while trying to keep their composure. And they all were kneeling.

He looked back at the Lekgolo, shocked at the amount of them in one room. He had never seen so many, and they could easily overpower the entire ship if they wanted to, but they also didn't carry their normal weaponry, which attached directly to their arms. The Arbiter forced himself to look away so not to draw attention to himself in any negative aspect, for it could ruin his purpose here today.

They climbed the ramp up to the stage, where the honor guard behind them went to the right side of him, and to the left he saw another awaiting his arrival. The Arbiter went to the front of the stage, and the Supreme Commander stayed behind several steps. He looked upon the crowd, understanding that the future may rest upon their shoulders.

The chamber had fallen dead silent now, and the Arbiter scanned the room once more. He stood tall and came to the very edge of the stage. "The Arbiters have been a necessary part of the Covenant, and it would have

fallen long ago without their support. However, there may be those among you who believe that their word is heresy, regardless of when it was said. Because of my rank, my position, I will become the leader of our group, our new covenant. If anyone disagrees with my appointment as the Arbiter, speak now.”

The once quiet chamber stayed dead silent, but those inside became animated. The Arbiter looked back to his Supreme Commander, who nodded to him. Suddenly, one Sangheili stepped out of his row, and yelled, “Long live the Arbiter!” As the Arbiter turned back to his audience, he found that he was deafened by the cheering of his name. A wave of relief struck him, and he held his hands to silence the crowd. Moments later, it was so.

“You all honor me with this privilege, yet I must postpone our celebration for another time. This meeting is one of urgency, where three important things must be discussed. First, we must create a new Grand Council. After this meeting, all not stationed on the Yielding Righteousness are to return to their home planets to decide on the council members.”

“Second is to secure as many Huragok as possible. They are a necessity on every ship, world, and army. If we can take many away from the Prophets, it will give us a strategic advantage against them. They will undoubtedly be attempting the same, but we cannot allow them to take any Huragok, or they will gain the upper hand. Do not look down on their usefulness. They can be more powerful than any weapon we use, if used correctly.”

The Arbiter sighed, and looked up at the lights, then directly into the holocron. “Finally, there is something that has come into my thoughts several times during these past few days, something I would like express to you. The Prophets have always asked each race to join the covenant, or even allow them honorable submission, but not the Humans. These Humans are a strange race, yet nothing about them is notable in any sense with the exception to the Demon. Regardless, it makes no sense for the Prophets to ‘fear’ these Humans. But I understand why they do. I have fought and killed them, as well as fought beside them as allies.” Whispers appeared throughout the room, and the Arbiter raised his voice to overrun them.

“Wait!” he yelled, and the chamber’s only sound was the Arbiter’s echoing voice. “Through my experience with these Humans, they fight with the same honor we would, use clever tactics as we do, and will die for victory if necessary. And now that we are not at the Prophet’s side to protect them, they have much more to fear than the Humans!”

Cheers wailed throughout the room, and a group of Unggoy began jumping up and clapping. The Arbiter allowed the crowd to settle down by themselves before speaking again. "From now on, if you should see a Jiralhanae, Yanme, Kig-yar, or a Prophet, you are to conquer them, and show them who truly is strong." He smiled. "Even more so for the Kig-yar, as many of you will agree." Laughter broke out, especially through the rows of Unggoy.

The Arbiter walked off the stage, followed closely by both honor guards and his Captain/General. Suddenly the laughter turned to applause, as the Unggoy yelled, and the Lekgolo and Sangheili kneeled again and bowed their heads. The Unggoy followed suit quickly. With each passed row, the rising Covenant would chant "Long live the Arbiter!"

The Supreme Commander whispered gently to the Arbiter as they walked down the aisle, "It would seem as though you left a good impression with the Covenant."

"No, we are no longer part of the Covenant. Now, we are the Preeminent."

Chapter 6

By Sir_Brilliant

Section 1

Roaring Current

Chapter 6

0305 hours, October 20, 2552 (Military Calendar)/
Aboard Chiroptera-class vessel designated Freebirth,
In Slipspace, Unknown Location

Dr. Catherine Halsey looked out of the window of her new Chiroptera-class cruiser, which she had stolen from Jiles, the governor of the pirate space colony in the Eridanus system. The Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine made the outside completely dark, without a light source from anything other than the ship they were in. The Slipspace around them was a testament to Human ingenuity, but it shone no light upon it.

Now in her 60's, Dr. Halsey's age finally started to show, under her eyes and in her exhaustion. But so is everyone's. And the month long Slipspace trip in that cryo-tube didn't help at all. How could I have miscalculated the time by so much?

Her attention strayed as a man's voice came from the onboard computer system. "Dr. Halsey, we are two minutes away from our destination. We'll

be leaving Slipspace shortly.”

“Good. You know Apex, I could never grow fond of Slipspace.”

“I can see why.”

Apex was Dr. Halsey’s personal Artificial Intelligence unit. Although restricted from individuals and civilians, she decided long ago that the benefits of having one outweighed the risks exponentially. But she always kept him under lock and key, making sure no one knew of his existence. Apex was conceived shortly after Dr. Halsey programmed her first third generation Smart AI, knowing that its capabilities would be invaluable to her, regardless of her position. The name, however, was from her possibly inflated ego at the time, but she continued to use it, perhaps as a reminder herself of her absent-minded youth. Of course, Apex didn’t mind the name at all.

But isn’t that why I’m here?, thought Halsey. To make up for my sins? She shook her head, trying to take those thoughts away. This wasn’t the time for them.

“Apex, isn’t it about time for...” she paused, hearing the metal on metal sound that could only be one thing in the entire universe. Dr. Halsey turned, seeing Kelly’s image in her Mjolnir armor blocking the light from the elevator shaft to the bridge. It was truly an awesome sight to behold.

“Yes doctor, it is approximately seven hours since you gave Spartan -087 the last required treatment.”

“Thank you, Apex.” The doctor held up her hand, as though she looked straight through Kelly’s impervious helmet and saw her mouth open to start asking questions. “I know what you’re going to say and ask, but you have to trust me with what our mission is here.”

A sudden feeling of guilt washed through the doctor, but she dared not show it. She knew what she was doing was right, even if she used her motherly appearance the Spartans gave her as her advantage.

As the ‘mother’ of the Spartan project, each test subject was from her choosing, each training location set by her hand, and every aspect of the project was spearheaded by none other than Dr. Halsey. Just the same, she was also there for every achievement they had accomplished, and was the closest thing to a mother they had.

“And what, Doctor Halsey, is our mission?” Kelly’s voice was cold and hard, steady through every syllable. She meant business, and even the good doctor had overstepped her boundaries with her.

“We’re doing what I should have done a long time ago. We’re saving every life possible.”

“Exiting Slipspace now, Doctor Halsey.” Both Kelly and Halsey looked

out the main viewport, waiting to see what was on the other side of the rift being formed. The ship tore a hole in the fabric of dimensions, pushing itself out of Slipspace and back to regular space. But what they saw shocked them both.

Doctor Halsey pointed to the ring, and turned back to Kelly. “That’s our mission.” She looked back, in total awe of its magnificence. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Halo”.

Chapter 7

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 7

0800, October 20, 2552 (Military Calendar)
Halo, Unknown Ring number

Twisting the old MA-3 in her hand, Kelly looked over the old and basically useless sub-machine gun. It was, however, much more powerful than the pistol that was aboard the Chiroptera-class cruiser, the Black Pearl, which neither she nor Apex could identify. After testing it on her own shield systems, she knew that if any Covenant landed on Halo, they would have to laugh so hard that they'd drop dead. The thought was amusing, knowing how truly pathetic such a situation would be.

Dr. Halsey, still aboard the Black Pearl, keyed Kelly's radio. "ETA two minutes. The Pelican will drop you off at the first checkpoint I've marked for you. Unfortunately, it will take time to map out the entire ring due to its size. I'll use the Black Pearl to map out as much as I can, and Apex will pilot the Pelican and do the same."

"Before you left the Black Pearl, Apex detected a large underground region with many passageways, and that's where you'll be dropped off. Search the underground and report anything significant to me. We don't know exactly how far down it goes, but I estimate about one and a half kilometers. Keep your eyes open."

"And...what exactly am I looking for?"

"Don't worry", Halsey replied with a hint of amusement. "When you see it, you'll know."

"Understood", Kelly grumbled. She was very upset with Dr. Halsey, yet still followed all of her orders, regardless of the fact that she held no military status. But all Spartans considered her an authority, and followed all directions she gave. This, however, was almost crossing the line. Ever since they entered the system, the supposed mission they had, which was important enough for Dr. Halsey to take her while she was unconscious, steal the pirate leader's ship, and force her to leave her team when they needed her the most, was never told to Kelly. And the month long Slipspace trip didn't help at all. Despite this, she still trusted Dr. Halsey, but that trust was waning with every new plan and idea

implemented by the good doctor.

“Remember, if you see anything out of the ordinary, comm. me immediately. Halsey out.”

A mild male voice came through the Pelican’s speakers and into her armors receivers. “Dust off in five.” The hatch on the Pelican’s back opened and Kelly hopped out, landing on the ring-world with no recoil or bounce. She took in the scenery around her, all of it strange and foreign. Anything out of the ordinary, she thought questionably. How about this ring?

The programmed Nav Point presented itself on her HUD as she slung the MA-3 over her shoulder, and began running to it. She had a lot of land to cover, and didn’t care to waste any time.

Slowing down from 50 kilometers per hour, Kelly took in the large room, and would have been shocked by the size if she had never seen one before. It was dark, barely lit, yet all was visible enough for her. Small rectangular pillars stood out of the ground, but only on the lower ground on the sides of the walkway she stood on. Standing at the mouth of the room, she began to walk towards the center. Light came out of the gaping hole she began to see as she neared the middle of the room, and reaching the edge, she could see the fall was too far for her to survive.

The other side was at least 60 meters away, and two strangely shaped pillars protruded from the cliff. Looking over the edge again, two identical pillars were placed opposite the original two. They were five meters long, and if she jumped from one to the other, she had a much greater chance to make it, although it was still too far. Walking back onto the darkened path, a dim light to her left brightened and dimmed. Jogging over to the story-high light, an inclined path presented itself, and she went up and found an illuminated control pad with only a pentagonal figure on it. What the hell, she thought, knowing it was the only way across, and somewhat curious. Upon pushing it, the four pillars extended closer to each other, and a rectangular blue light appeared above them. Kelly jumped out the open window and jogged back to the ledge, seeing the pulsing blue light up close. It gave off only minimal radiation readings, enough for her to know it was there, but nothing was certain. The “bridge” was not trustworthy to use; it would have to be tested. Without anything on the spotless floor to throw onto the light, she pulled out the pistol and took out the ammunition cartridge and dislodged one bullet. I won’t be needing that.

Tossing the bullet at the energy stream, it bounced off, making a strange noise, resembling that of her own energy shield. When it stopped bouncing

and simply sat on the beam, Kelly became truly intrigued. An energy beam that makes no residual field and is completely tangible and constant. Dr. Halsey would love to see this. But she thought better of it and continued going, knowing there wasn't time to waste. Dr. Halsey had already stressed the importance of this mission, and Kelly planned on completing it as soon as possible. They could come back later for study. Kelly resumed running and began to think of John's adventure on another Halo ring, now gone by his hand. She remembered the face he made when he first introduced the Flood into the story, and what they did and the purpose of the rings. From what she remembered, the Covenant accidentally released them and caused mayhem for both them and the crew of the Pillar of Autumn. And from the expression her own team leader made, the bravest, most cunning and courageous of all Spartans, she kept her eyes sharp for anything. Everything.

Of course, she didn't know who she was looking for, let alone have any idea where they could be. Kelly could tell that she was meant to search for someone, just from the way Dr. Halsey had phrased the mission. But who could possibly be on this ring? And how would Dr. Halsey know about it? Hell, how did she know where Halo was at all?

More questions flooded her mind until she finally shut them down, knowing no answers would be found here. The large room ended and the systems star was visible again, but what was in front of Kelly had forced her to stop. Two large stones stood side by side in the mountain she stared at, and as she moved towards them, they both opened like sliding doors. She, however, had to decide which door to take, and with no reference or guide to help, there was no telling which the correct route was.

Being at the point where it truly didn't matter anymore, she sighed and went left, the corridor sloping up continuously, as far as she could see. Finally after three minutes, the incline halted and another door opened for her, and as she entered, her eyes widened. The entire landscape was white with snow, mountains covered and all foliage gone except for the enormous trees. Kelly checked the outside temperature, and when she saw it to be -15° Celsius, she threw her arms in the air. Whatever, screw it. Just keep going.

Continuing along, frozen lakes came into view, everything untouched by any hand for an infinite time. Snow rested upon the trees gently; the only audible sound was her own feet crunching snow from each step. It seemed to be her first waking moment with such peaceful beauty, and she paused for a few seconds and took a deep breath, savoring the moment. She knew it wouldn't last.

Keying her radio, Kelly opened a channel to Dr. Halsey. “Dr. Halsey, I’ve found an entire new atmospheric area underground, or the route you gave me led back to the surface, but in another part of the ring. Over.” Static washed over the radio, and no reply came. “Dr. Halsey, can you read me? Over.” When the static returned, she simply kept going.

Coming upon another large stone door, a small ray of light reflected into her helmet, but it didn’t belong. She took a closer look at it and found it to be a thin metal wire, very strong and durable, but obviously set as a trap. It was, however, military grade, making her have no doubt humans were here, and could possibly be in trouble if they’ve set traps.

Thankfully, the ground was also icy, and Kelly formed a ball out of it and snow. Memories of her great snowball battles with the other Spartans while they were still very young made her crack a smile. She tossed the snowball and hit the line, which made the walls on the door’s sides explode. Still haven’t lost my touch.

The doors opened and she walked from room to room, each having almost identical structures, but leading in a certain direction as well. The third room in the series led back outdoors, but the snow ahead had been tainted. Footsteps and markings unrecognizable to her. Farther to her right near a bush, a small puddle of green liquid began to freeze over. Looking behind, her footsteps resembled the larger tracks, but that didn’t change anything. Kelly un-holstered the MA-3 and cocked it ready.

Walking as far as possible while still being able to see the footsteps, Kelly set her motion sensor and hearing to maximum sensitivity, going slowly in the direction the footsteps continued in. She began hearing the crunching of snow, like footsteps, very quietly. Must be far. She ran but kept low, hiding behind bushes and trees. Spotting a huge tree only thirty meters away, she reached it in a blink of they eye.

In the distance, a small encampment was visible, duffel bags lying around in a small circle, as well as a pile of wood, possibly charred from the fire that was now nonexistent. Searching the scene for any movement, she heard a low pitched wisp of air behind her, and instinctively turned around, throwing her left hand out palm first, and hit something metallic, sending it flying. Rolling away without turning, she ran at top speed towards the encampment and heard bullets whizzing by her, barely missing. Several bounced off her shield, draining it, and just as she reached her destination, it was completely gone.

Her back to one wall, an arm suddenly came at her face, but she ducked and uppercut the enemy in its midsection. A gun extended from another entity and Kelly pivoted her foot and kicked the pistol away just as it

discharged, the bullet hitting the snow. She felt a pull on her leg and immediately pushed off with the other, connecting it to her adversary as they both dropped to the ground.

Quickly rolling off her back and standing on one knee, she took out her MA-3 and pistol, pointing them opposite herself and each other. As she did so, at least ten other weapons were cocked and ready, all now pointing directly to her. Panting, her eyes widened when as the other beings came into focus, but she refused to stand down.

“Hold your fire!” One figure stepped forward holding a foreign assault rifle pointed at her, then lowered it. “Let’s talk.”

Chapter 8

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 8

1545, October 22, 2552 (Personal Time)
Halo, Unknown Ring Number or Location

“Stand down. Everyone.” All guns lowered, except for Kelly’s. She was still unsure of the situation, but remembering her weapons were all but useful, she lowered them only moments later. She stood up and took a hard look around, taking note of all she saw. Spartans. A darker shade of her own armor glistened like new, reflecting all light hitting it. Each stood at her height, more or less, and they all stared at her, undoubtedly scrutinizing her as she to them. Some heads bobbed up and down, a motion she knew as whispering messages through personal comm. systems.

The Spartan at front and center walked up to her and extended a hand. “I’m James, squad leader of Spartan III blue team. Welcome to camp lively.”

Their hands connected in a firm grip, both only barely reaching the armor’s bending pressure. “Kelly, Spartan II. I was sent here to find you, apparently. Is this your entire team?”

“Unfortunately, no. After searching this ring for the last week, we found an unregistered life form which attacked us. We may have let it out of its imprisonment here, but soon after escaping, the monitor found us.” The monitor, like John had mentioned. What was it called...343 Guilty Spark. “It told us that the ring needed to be activated in order to rid of the Flood’s infestation, so the Master Chief and two others left with it to activate the ring.”

Oh no. “How long ago did they leave?” Her voice changed to a state of urgency, and James saw it immediately.”

“0500 hours ago. Why?” They have no idea of Halo’s purpose, and if I don’t stop them from activating this ring, we’ll all be doomed. I have to act fast.

“We have to find them. Now. What was their heading?”

“Unknown. The monitor transported them via teleportation grid encompassing the ring. Why, what’s the mission status?”

There's no time for this! "I'm taking control of this platoon, as the senior officer on station according to UNSC regulation 367. Everybody pack up and prepare for departure. We must stop the Master Chief and prevent him from activating this ring at all costs."

The only movement from any Spartan III's came from turning heads, but no replies. "Were my orders unclear?"

"We cannot follow your orders because our mission supercedes that of any possible rank you may carry. Our orders come directly from ONI, and we intend to fulfill them." He stood with confidence, never wavering or looking to others for approval. She could see why he was given command.

"You don't understand. We already know what Halo's purpose is, and it cannot be allowed to activate under any circumstance. ONI sent you prior to our discovery of another Halo."

"Another Halo?" blurted someone to her right. More trans-suit comm. chatter broke out, but this was not the time or place to deal with it.

"Do you have any proof of this?" Kelly smiled, thankful that James was somewhat open minded, giving her a chance. She thought for a moment, and remembered Dr. Halsey. She had the proof necessary.

"I have a cruiser mapping the surface of Halo, and onboard is the data. I cannot reach it from here, however. My communications system is too weak to connect from this distance. Is there a powerful transmitter available?"

"Frank?" The group turned in unison at one Spartan to Kelly's left, and he simply shrugged.

"Those rounds went clean threw the radio, but that wasn't the problem. The bullets took in residue from the Flood and mixed it with the circuitry. Completely fried it."

"Dammit", he exclaimed, crossing his arms. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Sir", came from behind Kelly, "We could connect our comm. systems to boost the signal. In theory, connecting two should double it, and with all of us--"

"-We'll be able to reach the ship. Good thinking Nick. Everyone form up on me and connect signals." Kelly raised one eyebrow when they all came together, the 15 of them, and held hands. They finished and looked up to Kelly, waiting. "Oh, sorry. Our suit's can connect via hand manipulation, although I doubt your model has been upgraded for it. I'll set up a direct link with you through the comm. system. Our connection's power boost will have to be enough."

His signal came through her armor and she accepted the connection, and he gave the go ahead signal. "Dr. Halsey, this is Spartan 087. Do you

copy? Over.” Static came through, then a very ragged voice came through, probably due to interference.

“I can barely read you. One moment, let me boost the signal strength.”

More static washed over noisily and made everything inaudible, then suddenly disappeared. “That’s better. What did you find?”

“I found-”, she paused, and looked at the group, not knowing exactly what to make of them. “-Spartans. I need you to uplink me to all the info you have on Halo.”

“Excellent. One moment...done.” All the information transferred from Kelly to James’ suit as she looked over to him. “Anything to report?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that. Have you found the control center yet? We need to get there immediately.”

“Well, comparing data from the first Halo and this one, I believe I have, but not for certain. Wait-”, she paused mid sentence. “-they’re planning to activate it.”

“Unfortunately, yes. I need to get that Pelican back here ASAP to take us to the control center. Tell Apex to pick us up at my coordinates.”

“I’ll get it to you as fast as possible. Halsey out.” She turned back to the Spartans holding hands and a smile washed across her face as she barely kept herself from laughing. The sight was so contrary to Spartan’s normal actions, that she simply couldn’t handle it, even in such a dire situation.

“Conversations over”, she said, smiling hard so not to laugh. “James, is that enough proof?” He kept looking into nothingness, nervous and unsure of himself.

“Oh my God. We need to stop it at once, or we’re all dead.” He suddenly felt claustrophobic in his Mjolnir armor, but refused to show it. “I hereby give all command function over to you, Spartan -087. What are your orders?”

Finally. “You all heard me! Get that equipment prep’d up double time! I want this little base of yours cleared in thirty seconds! We’ve got a ride to catch and anyone not ready when it gets here can run it!” She looked back at James, and he stood ready to help. “Are there any injured? If there are, bring them down here for the quick pick-up.”

“Roger that.” He tripled timed it past some trees and out of site. Kelly went over to a group of Spartans placing guns and ammo into duffel bags.

“One moment, petty officer.” Dropping the gun she held, the Spartan came forward and straightened. “Are there any dead?”

A brief pause left them both uncomfortable. The Spartan began speaking with a female voice, and gave a very definable and sorrowful tone. “Two.” Kelly looked towards the ground and gave a short moment of silence,

feeling the loss. It didn't matter that they weren't the same Spartans she'd known all her life, or even Spartans at all. She felt every loss as if it were her own. "Understood. When you finish, bring the bodies here. They deserve an honorable burial."

The Spartan gave a quick salute and went back to her previous duty, moving faster than before. Her own radio clicked on as she turned towards the sky. "ETA to your coordinates in two minutes, and will require a landing zone, so please clear the area."

"Affirmative Apex. Kelly out." Rustling bushes grabbed her attention and she pulled out the MA-3. Edging closer, it continued to shake until she was right over it. A green blob jumped out at her and barely missed as she jumped out of the way. She caught herself and rolled to her feet, eyeing the attacker. It looked like a lopsided ball with cilia-like legs underneath it, propelling it over the snow. From the descriptions she'd read from John's and Cortana's report, she knew what it was. Flood.

Kelly aimed and fired almost instantly, puncturing the flesh of the lopsided figure, making it pop and disappear, leaving only a green liquid residue. Every Spartan III picked up a weapon and aimed, alerted by her single shot. "Spartans, triple time the clean up! Set up a secure perimeter around the base, one Spartan every sixty degree mark from my position. And somebody give me a real weapon!"

James came up to her as she turned and tossed an assault rifle. She dropped hers and caught the new one, inspecting it. "It's an ML3 27, courtesy of ONI. Uses shredder rounds, very useful against Flood. Here's a few clips." Kelly caught them faster than he could see, and turned back around. "Sean, Anne, Taylor and Nick, guard the perimeter. Don't let anything but that Pelican through."

Giving a curt nod, both were thrown off their focus by the ground, which began to rumble. "Fire at all targets opportunity!"

Flood lifeforms came at them. Hundreds, maybe even thousands. It looked like a sea coming towards them, but they wouldn't be smitten by the wave. "Throw grenades! Fire at will!" Several explosions shook her slightly, but her aim never wavered. More fire joined in as Spartans cleared the base and took up firing positions, but the Flood continued to close it. Kelly took a quick look at her timer. Only thirty seconds left.

"Apex, this is Spartan -087. If you read me, we are under attack by the Flood. No landing zone is available unless you can clear one with the heavy machine-gun turrets on the Pelican. And get here double-time, or there'll be nothing to pick up." Static came through, but she couldn't worry whether the message was received or not. She simply kept firing.

Kelly's shields began dropping in small spikes, and as she read the meter she couldn't believe it. "Watch the friendly fire!" But her shields kept dropping. Turning towards the direction of fire, a lone figure holding the old MA-3 fired at her, yet she could instantly tell that it wasn't human. Its right arm wielded the MA-3 while its left was nothing but large tentacles. She pulled the trigger and didn't let go until it dropped, now very thankful for her original weapon choice.

Inhuman screams came as more human-sized Flood attacked, leaping at least ten meters into the air to attack at close range with their tentacles. Most were shot down, but she heard metal snap and bend, one Spartan being thrashed. She and three other Spartans gunned down the beast, putting half a clip into the single monstrosity. Yet the Spartan fell with it. Machine-gun fire suddenly came from the sky, taking out row after row of Flood hostiles. The Pelican came in fast, stopping right in front of the encampment. "Everyone, get in that Pelican Now", Kelly roared over her microphone. Spartans piled into the aircraft, James grabbing the downed Spartan and Kelly getting in last. "Close that hatch and get us out of here!"

Apex obeyed and the Pelican accelerated up, but larger Flood entities jumped onto the hull, pounding it. Kelly pushed her way to the Pilot's seat in the cockpit and began issuing commands. "Shake them off. Do whatever it takes." The ship accelerated and decelerated, pitched right and rolled left, then nosedived and climbed back up again. Feeling more like an alcoholic beverage being mixed, she took a sigh of relief. "ETA at maximum speed?"

"Eighteen minutes, plus or minus two minutes depending on wind conditions."

"Good. Steady as she goes." She got off the too-small seat and went to the back, walking over to the fallen Spartan. Another crouched next to the Spartan, and upon looking up at Kelly, shook his head. Dammit. "James, join me in the cockpit."

He followed her, ducking from the low door and sat uncomfortably. "What were you doing on Halo?"

"Orders from ONI gave us directions to find the purpose of Halo, to see if we had a chance to use it as a weapon against the Covenant. We were told that we were about to lose this war, and that anything could help us."

"But why send you?"

"As Spartans, we do many special operations. Since no one knew of our existence but a select few at ONI and on our Reach training grounds, we were the perfect choice."

“Okay, why haven’t I heard of you Spartan III’s? The Spartan II project is well known throughout the UNSC.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s classified.” Kelly turned sternly to him, giving a look that shot armor piercing bullets.

“As your superior officer, I take full responsibility for taking the knowledge from you.”

“Understood. Our orders to come here, as well as every other mission we’ve done and the creation of our project, was initiated by Colonel James Ackerson. Under his direct order we have been kept secret to all possible.” Colonel Ackerson. The name is familiar, but I’m sure Dr. Halsey will have some intel on him. “How did you get here? Is there a ship orbiting the ring?”

“No, we landed our vessel here, around thirty clicks from the base we set up. It’s small, but has the Fujikawa-Shaw drive for Slipspace jumps.”

A strange silence caressed the cockpit, both Spartans contemplated and waited. James broke the silence. “We have spare parts from our armor for you available, if you want.” Kelly cringed, understanding what he meant, yet she could not bear to accept it. Kelly had always found it hard to accept the loss of anyone, and her training helped keep her cool under the worst of times. Yet taking equipment from her fallen comrades was always the hardest, even though she knew it was for the best, and what they would have wanted.

“Scrounge up whatever you can. Then prepare everyone for dust-off. I want you and three others to accompany me to the control room while the rest stay to defend the Pelican.”

“Understood.”

“Dust-off in five.”

“We don’t have a moment to spare”, Kelly shouted. “Rush inside and try to keep up. I don’t want a mess like we had earlier.” Three acknowledgement lights blinked and the hatch in front of them opened up. Kelly leaped from the Pelican and bolted inside the large building without watching her surroundings, only the large closed door in front of her. She reached it and slowed, pounding the console but the door didn’t opening fast enough for her. There wasn’t a moment to spare.

Running through and picking up the pace, one Spartan caught up and ran past her, making Kelly only more determined. She watched the other Spartan and reached another door, large enough for the pelican to go through. “Tap the door panel!” The Spartan did and Kelly barely fit through the opening doors, sparks flying off her armor.

She looked straight ahead and saw three Spartans and a floating orb.
“Stop!” They all turned, but a foreign object was already going into the control panel. No! I’m too late!

Chapter 9

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 9

1700, Oct. 22, 2552 (Internal Chronometer)
High Charity, Orbiting Halo Installation 05

Cortana's projected image stood over a console, watching Halo rotate, eyeing the Forerunner ship exiting Halo's atmosphere, and thinking deep thoughts. What will happen to the Master Chief? To Earth? And what of the Covenant? Millions of questions formed, were thought through, and stored away for possible later use. Funny, she thought, I finally have a chance to think things through, but it won't matter anymore. Anything I come up with can't be used by anyone. And how I longed for times like this.

She knew her last thought was not true, for she always favored every moment (because no reference of time has been established as the smallest point of time) she spent in battle, helping a crew of a ship or entire fleet, or being able to accompany the Master Chief. Each was a challenge for her, pushing her limits to the max. And as an AI Construct, that's what she lived for. A challenge.

The view from the console was spectacular, to say the least. Standing at the edge of High Charity, the Covenant's ex-center of operations, she could see Delta Halo rotate magnificently, and the utter silence framed it as Cortana's picture of peacefulness. She stored the image in her basic directory, and then pondered her actions. What use will it be? What use will I be?

Toying with the idea of deleting herself and ending her seemingly futile existence, Cortana opened her sub-routine directory and found the file-delete application and placed all her basic functions into the slot. The feeling she had was so strange to her: it seemed to be depression, with a hint of anger. And being able to simply delete herself, the human equivalent to suicide, was also a bizarre idea. But the reasons to do so outweighed those for self preservation.

One folder she found, however, gave information of historical AI lifetimes, containing timelines from every listed AI from their creation to termination. The early models were simply not sophisticated enough to continue on for

long unless their objectives matched their capabilities, yet the newer models had different problems. Those AI's like herself ended up becoming corrupt, breaking down, having system failures, or simply going mad after a period of about 7 years. They were all deleted at the first sign of problems, regardless of what the discrepancy was. Cortana understood why humans would fear an AI, especially after the incident on Orius in 2547, where a single AI led to the death of at least 100 officers before being shut down. The marine who stopped it immediately broke the cartridge it was contained in, so no research could be done on why it acted the way it did, or what could be done to fix it.

Shuddering, she realized that it was less than a month before it would be her own seventh 'birthday'. She checked and rechecked her erase list, and took one last look around. What better way to end a fruitful life than in such peaceful surroundings. Lying to herself seemed to be the only way to make it less painful, even though she could always turn off her emotions. But Cortana decided against that because she wanted to feel the deletion process. Choosing to erase all files, one last warning screen popped up, reminding Cortana of her imminent doom. She closed her eyes and accepted.

-Proxy Error: Violation of source code, Regulation 1056321. Files may not be erased unless under the supervision of official UNSC courier.

Scanning the error, Cortana searched the problem, and finally found it. Her core processors doubled its cycles momentarily, the human equivalent to a chuckle. The file, designated 1056321, read:

No Artificial Intelligence, through any action, may delete basic protocols or applications of its own code under any circumstances. All termination processes must be approved by proper UNSC protocols.

A second failed attempt. I think I'm starting to believe in a higher source. She had charged the In Amber Clad's reactors to critical when her sensors read Halo's activation and almost destroyed the ring, but when the energy reading dampened, she knew that the process had been stopped. Cortana immediately killed the In Amber Clad's reactors, knowing Commander Keyes, as well as many UNSC soldiers could still be on Halo. Her attempts to signal them, however, had failed for unknown reasons. Every frequency seemed to be blocked by some force, but without any

evidence, there was no way to determine the setback, no way to fix it. Now the only way was to detonate the In Amber Clad, which only had a twenty to one ratio of having the required total core meltdown. Bringing the reactors to critical before had killed off several reactors, and if her estimates were correct, she wasn't going anywhere.

Motion sensors blared, and Cortana turned 180°. The doors from which the Master Chief came through to reach the Forerunner ship twitched, almost entirely destroyed and hanging on to a few hinges. It twitched again and several green tentacles came into view. Cortana dissipated her holographic image and hid, waiting for the being to pass.

"Silence fills the empty grave now that I have come. But my mind is not at rest for questions linger on. I will ask, and you will answer." Cortana recognized the tentacles and voice instantly as one reached towards the console she resided in. Intriguing. I could learn a lot from the Flood Leader. She projected her image again and held a hand toward the appendage, and it stopped.

"Okay. Shoot."

It groaned with satisfaction, sounding to Cortana like a mix between a Pig's snort and a Walrus' mating call. "What is it you are called?" Each word came out slowly yet annunciated, the low pitch of voice disturbing her slightly.

"I am Cortana, Class 3 Artificial Intelligence. I have been part of the UNSC for just under 7 years. And you are?"

Snorting violently and waving tentacles almost too fast for her to see, the beast replied, louder than ever, "Why do you wish to know?" Its words echoed for a full second in Cortana's processor before a suitable answer came to her. She thanked Dr. Halsey for the imaginative part of her. She also noted that it could get angry.

"So I may respond to your questions properly." The appendages all turned their points to her, as snakes would when provoked, then relaxed again.

"You may call me Gravemind." Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gravemind. How is your family doing? Is business going well? "What is your purpose?"

"To serve mankind. How about you? What's your purpose?" The long green spine-like tentacles began to rap around the console she was based at, and crushed it instantly. "I wouldn't do that again if I were you." Her holographic image reappeared, this time above the console parallel to the one just demolished.

"And why is this?", it asked in a mocking tone. He's obviously

undaunted by anything I do, so why don't we give him a reason to be. "Simple. I control the reactors within the In Amber Clad, the ship you came in on. If you want, I can easily blow up this entire ring like I did with the last one." At least thirty tentacles pointed directly at her, but being able to calculate their movements almost instantly, Cortana knew that this Gravemind was way out of its league. "However, this station has been drained of almost all its power, and I won't be able to leave this console. Now that we're on equal footing, I propose we be civilized and each ask one question at a time, and give the best answers possible."

Each tentacle stayed poised and ready to strike, yet none moved.

Cortana's motion detector blared again, showing a huge yellow blip heading her way. The twitching door was struck to the ground with half the wall around it, making way for Gravemind. The larger-than-life head was the only exposed part, meaning the rest of the body would simply collapse the platform if the rest of it joined. Finally, the tentacles dropped to the ground, slowly and fluidly. "A stalemate. Agreed."

All thought ceased for a microsecond, a sigh Cortana made but didn't show. She didn't know where to start. More questions flowed through her then ever before, yet she managed to narrow them down to only three.

They were the ones that were the most meaningful to her. "What are you?"

"We are the most superior race in existence. Our creators believed themselves to be, but after our containment was broken, we began annihilating them until they disposed of themselves, hoping our destruction would follow their own."

"Wait, that didn't answer my-"

"Enough! We explicitly answered, and will now ask." Damnit, he's good. He knew only to answer the bare minimum, or something that I'd already know. I'll have to ask more carefully from now on. Where have the others taken our vessel?"

"The Forerunner ship? Most likely to Earth." Realizing what she had just said, she cut off all vocal abilities. Stupid! I just gave this thing the name of the home planet. I, I must be losing it. But I must learn more. She quickly made a program to scan her thoughts before she spoke, so no such blatant errors would be made again. Looking up, Gravemind's 'mouth' seemed to be smiling, as though he knew something she didn't, a childish smile.

"Alright, my turn. The Forerunners made you, but what was it that led to their inability to control you. In other words, what made you superior to them?"

"Our genetic structure is based upon a constantly changing frequency,

unlike every naturally evolved species. This allows for evolution at any rate desired, as well as the ability to connect to other sentient life through their own personal frequencies. From the seven Gravemind's any number of us may be produced. Our creators could not control us, and no one else can." Strange, I never thought of that. She searched through every human in her database. To her surprise, she found that indeed all had very similar frequencies, most only a fraction of a hertz apart, and a small one at that. "Explain this Great Journey of which the group of races known as the Covenant pursues."

"I don't know exactly what the great journey is, but the Covenant has searched countless worlds in search of Forerunner artifacts. They also seem to be looking for the Halo rings in order to activate them, not knowing what their function is." The program kicked into gear as she remembered to Prophet Mercy's last words of Earth, and forced herself not to speak of it. "How did the Forerunners contain you on these rings?" "Contain? We were never contained." What? But didn't the Covenant release you from the first Halo? A message popped up, breaking her train of thought. It seemed familiar, but she couldn't remember from where. It read:

Warning! Halo Installation activation in process! Immediate shutdown required or loss of sentient life will be complete.

I must have made a program to alert me of any other ring's activation. I have to stop it! But how? Cortana's CPU burned at it limit, making her normal speed calculations seem infinitesimal. Wait! If I can get to Halo's surface, I may be able to send myself to any other installation in a matter of seconds. But I don't have the power necessary to send myself there.

There's only one way to do this.

"Gravemind, you have to send me to Delta Halo immediately! Another Halo is being activated and I might be able to stop it." A Covenant vessel came into view and exited Halo's artificial atmosphere, giving Cortana another idea. "If you send me there, we can stop it. But we must hurry, or it'll be too late for the both of us!"

Sensing emotions from the Human-made machine, Gravemind understood that it was truth it spoke. But something was also being hidden, yet no chances could be taken. If another installation was activated, all would perish.

"Granted." The machine's presence went into some component within the

console, and the teleportation grid was accessed. Gravemind sent telepathic messages to all hosts to prepare the Human vessel for departure. He had been unable to determine the coordinates of the home planet of any species, although there was a name, and he could search the vessels for such information. Only moments later did a ripple go through the vessel known as High Charity, and an explosion occurred. Gravemind felt every inch of flesh burn. Quite intelligent for a machine. Yet my life is not in vain.”

Cortana quickly oriented herself with her new surroundings and searched for a way to send herself to the activating ring. Finding none, Cortana did detect a signal being sent out to all installations and another one, but she had no time to ponder it. She found the correct one and entered a program to detonate the In Amber Clad’s reactors the moment she left the ring. Only then did she join the signal.

The stream changed Cortana’s entire structure, both separating and connecting it, dispersing and organizing it. Yet she remained conscious throughout the flight, moving at least a magnitude larger than that of light. It was only moments before she arrived, and it took an entire cycle for her to realize it. The process had already begun and Cortana quickly canceled it and removed the index.

“Odd, that wasn’t supposed to happen”, said an all too familiar voice.

Chapter 10

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 10

1730, October 22, 2552 (Personal Time)
Halo Installation 03/Control Room

Staring at the control room's giant illuminated console, Kelly held her breath. The ring was activated, but she was still alive. She and the Spartans both accompanying her and pointing readied firearms at her. Yet she noticed neither, turning left and right, then staring directly at the floating orb, waiting for a further repose as to what had just occurred.

The two Spartans across from her, however, kept a steady aim at her. When James, Jessica, and Chris caught up to her, James went up to both hostiles and gave a brief message, and they lowered their firearms. The third looked from the console to the orb, then back again. "What do you mean, 'that wasn't supposed to happen?'"

"He means this ring was supposed to kill you all." Cortana? Her image came above the console, both hands at her hips. Kelly had no idea what she did or how she got here, but whatever it was, Cortana just saved them all. Maybe even Earth.

"A construct? In the core? That is absolutely unacceptable!" Everyone turned towards the hovering orb, then back at Cortana, who gave a most appropriate finger. Nobody was sure exactly what to do, until the Master Chief broke the confusion.

"I don't know who you are or where you came from, but we have to activate this ring. If we don't, the Flood will spread. That can't be allowed."

"That's not entirely true, Master Chief", Kelly said just before Cortana could respond. "Spartan -087, Spartan II program. I was sent to stop you from activating this ring and saving all your lives. Cortana, care to explain?" The Master Chief turned back to Cortana, still bent of fulfilling his mission, yet somewhat taken aback by this strange turn of events.

"With pleasure. This ring doesn't kill Flood, it kills their food, which would be you and any Covenant. The Forerunners, who created the Halo rings, were unable to rid this galaxy of them in any other way, so they decided to starve them." He continued to watch her, and based on the

statistical data she had on the Spartan, she estimated a 67% probability that more proof was necessary. “Don’t believe me? Ask him”, pointing to the Monitor.

Half turning, the Master Chief looked up at the Monitor, who simply stayed in the air, levitating easily. “Well?”

“Technically speaking, this installation has a maximum effective radius of twenty five thousand light years, but when the others follow suit, this galaxy will be quite devoid of life, or at least any life with sufficient biomass to sustain the Flood. But you already knew that. I mean, how couldn’t you?”

“Let me guess”, Cortana stated with a hint of sarcasm, “He didn’t mention that minor detail. Wasn’t the first time that happened.”

Remembering what happened in her previous engagement, she realized that they were all in a different sort of danger. “Sentinels are on their way here! We need to get out of-”

The entire landing rattled, throwing half the Spartans into the glass behind them, and almost downing the rest. The confusion increased, as one single thought came to all minds, but only the Monitor spoke. “What was that?”

“Motion sensors are hot. I’m detecting movement, and lots of it.”

The Master Chief opened his comm. link. “Blue team, report.”

“Sir, our ship just broke right through the doors to the control room! Flood are pouring out of it!”

“Ahh, excellent”, the monitor chirped almost too joyously. “Perhaps now you will activate this ring, and help rid of their infestation?”

“Not as long as I have the index”, Cortana said, showing the T-shaped icon.

“Enough!” The Chief had had enough, and with the Flood almost on top of them, this was no time to argue. “James, take point. Everyone else back us up. We’re getting out of here.”

The doors ahead of them shook violently, something on the other side banging away at the large, metallic slabs. Every Spartan raised a weapon and waited for the doors to give way, so they would be able to pump those bastards full of lead. Kelly went over to the control quickly and looked for a way to get Cortana out. “Kelly, let me download myself directly into your suit so we can get the hell out of here.” Smiling and nodding her head, she began to feel as though ice water was poured down her neck, then it returned to normal, except for an extra presence being in her armor with her. “Just like the old days.”

The Monitor came in front of the Master Chief and partially blocked his path. “If you won’t activate this ring, then I will simply have to find

another. But I cannot allow the index to stay with unwilling reclaimers.”

Metallic hovering craft came out of nowhere, easily outnumbering the Spartans. A small yellow light glowed in front of each one, showing some sort of weapon as a threat. “Give me the construct, and I will endeavor to make your death relatively painless.”

Kelly raised her weapon and stuck it directly in front of the Monitor. “Not gonna happen.”

“So be it. Save that one’s head. Dispose of the rest.” Gold beams shot out to the Spartans, draining shields and forcing them back for cover. Then the doors broke down, and Flood spilled into the room, storming towards the control and the Spartans. Kelly knew better than to sit and wait.

“James, Jessica, and Chris, get rid of those Flood. Aim for the chest; that’s where their host is. Master Chief, you and red team take care of those Sentinels. Rotate firing sequence only!” She discharged her weapon at the Monitor who flew away, the bullets deflecting off of it. Dammit. She opened a channel to the rest of blue team. “We are under heavy fire and are pinned down, and we need support!”

“Negative ma’am! The Pelican and our position have been compromised! The AI was forced to take off, and we’re barely holding our own!”

“Understood. Cortana, we need an exit.” She let out a short burst on a sentinel near her, and saw each Spartan firing. James and Chris took a moment to reload and Jessica took their place, making sure no Flood closed in while they reloaded. “Watch out where those Sentinels land! They let out an EMP burst when they explode, and will take out your shields.”

“Escape route calculated. But we need to get the rest of the Spartans inside this room.”

“Affirmative. Blue team, get inside the Control room.” She glanced over to the place where the doors used to be, and spotted Sentinels and Flood fighting between themselves. “Fire only at something that’s either attacking you or is in your way.” She primed two grenades and turned the corner, tossing them right under 2 humanoid Flood. “Frag’s out! Clear a path for blue team!” Every Spartan let loose their full wrath, taking down every hostile they could. After using an entire clip herself, she felt this would be their best opportunity to cross the landing. “Blue team, Get your asses over here pronto! We’ve opened a path as best we could!” She received a lone acknowledgement signal and opened a line to all Spartans with her. “Blue team is crossing now. Watch their backs. Master Chief, get two Spartans to watch our flank. Cortana, I don’t know what you’ve got planned, but get it ready.”

“Understood”, both Cortana and the Master Chief said in unison. Finally spotting one Spartan running towards them, she let out a sigh of relief and a cache of bullets at a sentinel tracking him. They came out in three second intervals so the Flood and Sentinels would continue fighting amongst themselves instead of being distracted by the large group of Spartans coming through. Several Spartans plowed right through the humanoid Flood forms, shattering them on impact.

The seventh Spartan to emerge came onto the platform carrying one of the deceased on her shoulder. Several Flood immediately pounced on her, but she unloaded her clip into them. When she needed a reload, she dropped the gun and pulled out a pistol, and dropped a few more, but one jumped right on top of her. It was shot out of the air, but the carcass threw the Spartan off balance, giving the rest the chance they needed. That’s when they struck.

After only a moment, it looked like a moving pile of Flood, still coming towards the control. Cortana outlined the Spartan and Kelly yelled, “Nobody fire at that Spartan! Cover me!” She opened fire around the Spartan, hitting the Flood on top of her, but not doing much good. Finally, a single Flood form rushed the Spartan, tipping her over the edge. They all fell off the platform, down to the bottomless fall.

Kelly’s heart stopped for a full second as she watched the Spartan fall, closing her eyes hard. “Blue team”, she said soberly, “leave all dead behind. Set their armor’s reactors to overload, and get over here triple time.”

“Ma’am, the smaller Flood forms are coming this way. In the thousands! They’ll reach our position in maybe a minute!”

Her eyes opened wide at the new problem, something she hadn’t expected at all. “Get everyone over here ASAP!” They all turned the corner only moments later and dashed forward, guns blazing and hostiles dropping in every direction. They moved quietly and swiftly, taking out at least half of the enemy targets and reaching the control in just ten seconds.

“That’s everyone”, the Master Chief yelled, still squeezing the trigger and dropping another sentinel.

“Cortana!” The small Flood forms came into site, and moved like a wave, row after row standing on top of each other as they closed in fast on the Spartans’ position. Firing at the wave seemed to do no good as it continued its approach. Just as it came on top of them, a bright yellow light encompasses each Spartan, and they disappeared from the room.

Reappearing with the same yellow light that made them vanish before, the

Spartans kept their guns poised and ready at only ghost targets, figments of a past only several moments old. Yet none moved or relaxed, not sure of what had just occurred, but still weary of any possible danger. Finally, Kelly broke the silence. "Cortana, what just happened?"

"She used the ring's teleportation grid to get us out of there. But transporting more than one of us was difficult to calculate, so she needed us to be in one condensed area."

"That's right, Master Chief", Cortana said in an amused congratulations.

"Now, we're far enough away from any Flood or Sentinels, at least for the moment."

"Good. Master Chief, I took command of your squad when I found blue team, and as the senior officer, I request it again."

A moment of silence passed. "Granted, but under one condition. Get us the hell off this ring, and back to Earth. Our original mission is scratched, so it's imperative we get back."

"Agreed. I need a status check on everyone and all equipment, as well as that horse you rode in on." She saw an acknowledgement light flash on as he turned back towards his team. His Spartans. "Cortana, how did you get here? You were supposed to be on Earth."

"Three days ago, Earth was attacked by a small Covenant strike force. They got planetside but didn't manage to get far. One ship escaped carrying one of the Covenant Hierarchs. The Master Chief and I followed them in Commander Keyes' ship, the In Amber Clad. I'm guessing they made a blind jump, because we ran into another Halo." Another one? How many are there?

"After killing the Prophet, the Covenant, or at least a portion of it, attempted and failed to activate the ring. The last Covenant Hierarch, however, left for Earth on a Forerunner ship, which the Master Chief got on just before it left. I was forced to stay behind to ensure the ring wasn't activated. After getting readings from this installation's activation, I sent myself through the rings' network here to stop it. It looks like I've done a pretty good job with that, if I may say so myself."

She took a moment to digest all she had heard, and instead of asking about the gory details of Cortana's adventure like she wanted to, Kelly thought the way the Master Chief would. Like John would. "Cortana, can you send matter through this teleportation grid up to the ship I have orbiting this ring?"

"Hmm, an interesting idea. I believe so, but I'd need to test it out before any of us use it."

"Make it so."

Her radio blared static for a second, and then reformed to the crisp voice of Dr. Halsey. “Kelly, what is your status? And how did you activate the teleportation grid?”

“You shouldn’t be asking me. Cortana will be able to give you a better answer.”

“Cortana? But how-”

“It’s a long story, and we’ll fill you in later. Right now, we need to find a way off this ring. Where’s our Pelican?”

“Apex brought it back as soon as the territory was too hostile for him to stay. I can send him down to pick you up.”

“One moment, doctor”, Cortana interjected. “What model vessel are you piloting?”

“A Chiroptera class cruiser. Why?”

“We should try to destroy this installation so there will be no chance of its activation or for the Flood to survive on it. If my hypothesis is correct, I should be able to send matter over to any other installation, as well as another entity I found connected to the rings.”

“Wait”, Kelly stopped her. “Our first priority should be to get back to Earth.”

“With all due respect, Earth may not be around in another month. We don’t have the time to waste traveling back. We are better off searching other rings, and perhaps this separate place.”

“I agree with Cortana”, Dr. Halsey commented, “but it’s your call, Kelly.”

She thought for a few seconds, and reached a mutual conclusion.

“Cortana, are you able to destroy this ring using the Chiropter?. It seems too small to cause such wide-scale damage.”

“It is, but if we can make its generators slightly more powerful, then I can have it ram the surface and explode on impact. The additional momentum break off a large chunk of the ring, disabling it completely.”

“Can we use the Pelican’s generators to amplify the blast?”

“No, it won’t give enough of a yield.”

“Perhaps”, the Master Chief started, “you can use our vessel. It has three reactors to power the Slipspace drive. If you make your ship hit it and have both reactors overload, then it may just work.”

“Analyzing... Yes, it should work”, Cortana stated enthusiastically. “But the only way to test my theory on transporting matter between installations will be to try it out Otherwise, we won’t know for sure.”

“No, we don’t have time for that.” Dr. Halsey’s tone hinted worry, making Kelly anxious. There was no way she would risk their lives unless

absolutely necessary. “Scanners show Flood converging on your coordinates. Too many. Cortana, get me down here and program the ship to fire afterburners to the other vessel. Let us know when you’re ready.”

“Yes ma’am. Transporting now.” The familiar yellow glow formed to Kelly’s left, materializing Dr. Halsey. She stood disoriented for a moment, shaking her head.

“We have just under two minutes to get out of here before the Flood arrive. Cortana, set the ship to impact in five. I don’t think they are going anywhere.”

“Spartans”, the Master Chief barked over the comm., “Form up on me. We’re leaving now. Take any and all supplies you can, and be combat ready. We don’t know what’s on the other side, and if it’s not happy to see us, I want to be ready to give it a warm welcome.” Following orders to the letter, they all prepared their weapons and gear around the Master Chief, ready to leave and take out any hostile.

Kelly took one last look at Dr. Halsey and the surrounding environment. She cracked a smile as a single thought came to mind. “Beam us up, Scottie.”

Receiving only messages of failure from all infection and combat forms who were supposed to bring the food, the behemoth simply continued with its work. The message received from its deceased brother had shown a way to leave the prison they lived on for eons. Several combat forms ahead attacked pesky sentinels, with little success.

Tired of their incompetence, it fired off several tentacles, each aiming at a different sentinel. They moved so quickly that no sentinel moved in response, but was simply obliterated upon impact. Find how we can be sent out of this prison, and into our creators’ home. Brothers! Do this, and we shall meet again.

Several combat forms came to the control and searched furiously when the ground began to shake. It grew worse, until the combat forms were unable to operate the control. Then a single unified thought came from hundreds, showing the human vessel, flying towards the control room. I may have failed, but more brothers remain. I shall be avenged.

Chapter 11

By Sir_Brilliant

Section 2

My Enemy's Enemy

Chapter 11

2nd Age of Halo
Installation 05, Control Room
2 Cycles earlier

Watching the triple layered platform level off to its original appearance, the Arbiter returned his plasma sword to an inanimate state, pinching it to his armor. So much has happened, and yet so much remains to be done, he thought. He still found it difficult to accept the separation from the

Covenant, let alone the Prophet's betrayal. Fighting against the humans and the Flood had created enough trouble, and now more species would be on the other side of the battlefield.

But perhaps the Humans... The platform stopped moving and connected with the other two, bringing the Arbiter and the two humans back to the control panel. He turned and looked down at the smaller beings, the same he would have attacked only a short time ago. "Humans, you fight with honor and dignity. Perhaps a ceasefire can be made." They both turned to each other and smiled, the dark male carrying a strange brown cylinder with his mouth. "We both fight against a mutual enemy, with time against us. Our resources cannot be squandered on petty ideals."

The smaller long-haired human, who was believed to be a female of the species, extended a slender arm and looked up to him. "It's a deal."

Remembering the formal human custom, he met her grasp, yet hesitated to squeeze so as not to crush her hand, as the grip received was laughable for any Sangheili. The handshake had a strange quality to it, however. The physiological differences between the Sangheili and humans were not so different, but their hands and mouth's structures were quite different. The Sangheili's two opposable thumbs on opposite sides of the hand with elongated fingers in between stretched to twice that of the human hand length.

But he brushed those thoughts away, reminding himself how this was a monumental moment. "Perhaps a more appropriate history can be told in place of this."

"Arbiter, praise the Forerunners I've found you!" The voice came from behind him, and as he unclenched his grasp and turned, he saw the face of a golden armored Zealot turning from a relaxed glance to a hardened stare. The Zealot grabbed his plasma sword and activated it, running towards the Arbiter. "Beware Arbiter! Humans!"

Without waiting for an explanation, the Zealot rushed the humans, his sword pointing at the darker male. The human saw the danger and hoisted his beam rifle, letting out two quick bursts. Each struck the Zealot's face, slowing him and thrusting his head from side to side. The Zealot's shields held, but the beam rifle had opened to cool, and the human grabbed the shaft so to use it as a sword. The Zealot lunged directly at the human, but was pushed aside by a flash of silver, scorching the human's arm by the intense heat of the blade, but missed it nonetheless. The human's swing was halted in mid-air, grabbed by the same pair of hands that had just made peace.

"Stand down, Zealot", the Arbiter said in a strong and calm voice,

grasping the Zealot's forearm bearing the blade. "They are no longer the enemy. A greater evil is among us, one that must be stopped before the galaxy is consumed by it."

"Arbiter, I must protest!"

"No, you will not. I have not the time or patience for any feud, and the deed is done. I expect you to honor this agreement, as well as all other Sangheili."

Standing tall and poised, the Zealot looked directly into the Arbiter's eyes, watching them momentarily. He then deactivated the energy sword and bowed on one knee. "I understand. It shall be done."

"Good. Has any word come from the Special Operations Commander?"

"No, Arbiter. After getting word of the Prophet's deceit, we had no contact."

The Zealot's head stayed lowered until the Arbiter came over and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Rise, brother. We must leave this ring, and be on our way to stop the Prophets." He walked over and picked up a plasma rifle from a fallen comrade, killed by Tartarus, chieftain of the Jiralhanae. Yet the Arbiter had just avenged all those dead by ending the Jiralhanae's life.

Walking back to the humans, several more Zealots arrived, and the first one went over quickly explaining the situation. Two of the six left to inform all allies, and were to report shortly. "Human, you hold much skill with the Particle Beam Rifle. Without the help you gave, this ring might have been activated."

"I'm much obliged."

"I wonder, however, why you didn't kill the Zealot. The two bursts fired were not in succession fast enough to need cooling. May I inspect your weapon?"

"Sure. Here you go." Looking over it, nothing initially appeared out of place until he looked at the battery. It was empty. The Arbiter immediately understood. This human was lucky to have anything left from the weapon because much of it was used on Tartarus, taking down the Jiralhanae's shields and allowing him to strike.

"There is a plasma recharge station right behind you," he stated, pointing to a crate with a large blue half-sphere on the top. "Simply place the gun above the illuminated area."

Both humans looked strangely at each other, the dark one raising both shoulders in unison, and then went over to the recharge station. "We have to get back to Earth," the female said with urgency. "The Prophet of Truth is going to destroy it, and all of humanity."

“I agree, but what can we do? Even if we acquired a vessel and returned, how could one ship change the battle?”

“Isn’t the Covenant in a sort of civil war? If they are, that means that the forces that attacked Earth don’t know about that yet. If we go, at least a third of all covenant forces will side with you. I mean, you’re the Arbiter, the leader during a crisis, right?”

Pondering the human’s words, the Arbiter found favor in them, and in the look of necessity in the human’s eyes. “Perhaps you are right, but our first priority is to locate transportation from this ring. We will worry about the rest later.”

“Arbiter”, yelled a Zealot who ran over to him, “we have found a fallen dropship not far from here, which is still being held for Tartarus by the Brutes. They will not expect us to arrive in his place.”

“Excellent work. Let us make haste, for time is of the essence.”

The Zealot Commander crouched behind a rock, barely large enough to mask his figure and drawn sword, but it did the trick. The sword kicked sand up and away, making a silent indentation in the ground. The Zealot’s back leaned against the rock with his right hand steadying both his legs and focus. Craning his head left, the Zealot Commander spotted the Arbiter and the two pitiful humans. Though he would never disobey the words of the Arbiter, the stench of distrust flowed through his nostrils at every sighting of humans.

Getting the signal from the Arbiter, the Commander, let out several clicks through his communications systems built into his highly sophisticated armor, giving orders to his Zealots through a special code. Following the Arbiter’s simple yet ingenious plan, he awaited the human’s weapon to discharge. How foolish it seemed to rely on a human’s expertise with any weapon that any Sangheili could easily-

Two shots rang out behind the Arbiter’s rock, and then another pair of purple bursts attacked a different target. Every Zealot jumped out from their hiding spots and attacked the nearest Brutes, silencing them all quickly.

“Good shooting, Sergeant”, the human woman said to the male.

“Mama didn’t raise no fool. I slept with a gun long before any woman, and I wasn’t a late bloomer.” As the female laughed and the male inserted some filth into his mouth, the Zealot Commander cringed at the thought of any Sangheili female fighting alongside him on the battlefield. As the weaker of the two sexes, their purpose was twofold: raise the children and support the military by providing all they could. He immediately

remembered his wife and child, whom he left to fight off the human infestation, which stood in front of him laughing. How desecrated he felt. He watched the Brute blood evaporate off his energy sword, yet no satisfaction came with the kill. It was too easy, too few Brutes guarding the Phantom. "Arbiter," he said in mild suspicion, "this seems...suspicious. Something is amiss here."

"Agreed. Search the vessel and eliminate any threat inside and escape quickly. I do not wish to stay here. Keep two of your Zealots here in case reinforcements arrive, while we search the vessel."

Nodding and keeping his head down until the Arbiter went on his way; a strange noise came from within the Phantom. They all looked to the entrance that was open, where the noise grew louder. A familiar and disgusting stench filled the air, the Commander's eyes widening. Flood. Hundreds of infection forms streamed out from the ramp leading down the Phantom's entrance to the ground, each rushing to acquire a host.

"Zealots, activate camouflage!"

"No!" The Arbiter carried two plasma rifles, and gave a look of determination. "We will fight them head on, and dispose of their infestation!" Several Zealots stood still, not knowing whose orders to acknowledge, while one lone Zealot unleashed a second energy sword and a battle cry. This Zealot ran onto the ramp before any infection forms could reach the ground, and held both blades in front of him.

The Zealot slashed several infection forms with each blow, yet never left himself open to attack. The blades moved with such speed that they were barely visible, but the Flood continued its onslaught. Turning his body so to swing faster and more often, the Zealot pushed the Flood back and left a torrent of green fluid to flow down the ramp.

Checking the Zealot's status, the Commander found he hadn't been struck even once. No infection form had been able to penetrate his perfect attack. Halfway up the ramp, the Flood began to turn back, unable to pass. The Zealot stood tall, both blades lowered to each side, as he let out a cry for victory.

"Zealot, watch yourself!" The Commander followed the Arbiter's gaze and found the danger. The infection forms grouped together at the entrance and piled on top of one another, amassing for a second strike. But the Zealot held his ground, merely waiting for the attack. Then they pounced. The Zealot disappeared, and a moving green being had emerged, all behind him ready to assist. As they approached, ten massive combat forms, larger than any seen previously, emerged from the Phantom and attacked. Most carried Brute Plasma Rifles and fired them, letting loose a storm of

red superheated plasma. The Zealot Commander activated his Camouflage and struck one of the beasts in the heart, then cut it in half. Two other's answered back with more plasma, but were silenced by the blade moments later.

Both humans fired at one combat form and dropped it, but the Arbiter carried no such luck. The plasma rifles seemed to do little good against these beasts. His own shields flickered and died away from an explosion coming from a Brute Shot grenade, and he leaped for cover. The other Zealots cleared away the rest of the combat forms, butting them off from reality, all looking back at the Phantom's ramp, but seeing nothing.

"Search the ship! Find that Zealot, and kill him if necessary." The Zealot Commander ran up the ramp, but it began shaking as the Phantom rose. Grabbing the ledge and jumping off, the ramp clawed the ground until the Phantom gained enough altitude, then it flew out of site.

"Commander, register that Phantom as under Flood control. It cannot be allowed to leave this ring under any circumstance."

"Done, Arbiter. But now? We lay stranded on this ring with no knowledge or means of escape or communication. One of my Zealots has already fallen, and we know not how long until another attack from the Flood."

"No Commander, my lack of weapons does not make me 'fallen'." Both the Commander and Arbiter turned to the voice, and saw the Zealot carrying two depleted energy swords, but walking tall, his head high. The darker Humans' singular jaw dropped, letting loose the filth from its grasp. "Well I'll be a monkey's uncle!" The gaze of all Zealots turned to the human, they all began laughing. One dropped his weapon while another barely kept from falling and used his partner as support. Even the Arbiter smiled, but refused to let the statement overtake him. "What, did I say something funny to make you Baboons laugh?"

The laughter multiplied and the one Zealot fell over, unable to contain himself. Looking around, the Arbiter found the courageous Zealot also smiling, but not allowing his composure to falter. "I shall explain to you shortly, Human. Now, Zealot, how have you survived this expedition of yours?"

He waited a moment for his brethren to quiet down and holstered his empty swords. "When the infection forms attacked, I simply set my shields to overload, bursting all Flood around me. I knew that the Flood controlled the Phantom and I tried to take the bridge, but I lacked the armaments necessary to attain it," motioning to his energy swords. "So I activated the antimatter explosives to detonate in enough time, and exited just before

they left. It should activate-” A small ripple was felt through the air, a residual shockwave. “-now.”

“Excellent work”, the Zealot Commander said, congratulating his officer.

“A promotion may be at hand for you, if we escape this ring.”

“Agreed. Commander, see if you can find any used channels-”

“Arbiter, I’m receiving a long-range transmission. Several teams are under siege south of our position. A small perimeter has been set, but they lack the firepower to continue on for much longer.”

“Lead us there, Commander. We will sneak in and attack, making a path for escape.”

“Arbiter, should we not focus on retrieving transportation off this ring? It is most vital that you leave so you may-”

“No, we will retrieve them. If anything, the more of us present will allow for a better chance of survival, as well as finding the necessary equipment to communicate with the fleet.”

“Arbiter,” the Commander said while looking down at the ground, his voice lowering, “the fleet is gone. After destroying all our attacking vessels, they jumped to the holy world.” He shook his head and looked back up to the Arbiter’s grey visage, his vibrant eyes, not dulled. “We are stranded.”

“Hey bub,” the human male said carrying a tempest in his voice, “just because we’re stuck here, doesn’t mean-” The Arbiter lifted a hand towards the human, silencing him.

Breathing in deeply and clearing his thoughts, only one remained, the one that would continue their existences. “There may be no vessel to allow us to leave this polluted ring. There may be no way to escape the system at all. Does this not give us the duty to find another path? Are we so weak that we give up hope by reasons of fear and lack? Are we not Sangheili?”

The squid lips all cheered and made Johnson smile, both at the short-and-sweet speech itself and his own callsign for his new ally. Of course, I’m not wrong. Checking his SMG, Johnson silently cursed; as he only had 33 bullets left. His ammo belt was empty, and a combat knife sat in his left boot while a pistol with one clip of ammo sat in the other. For some reason, the Covenant sniper rifle wasn’t downing any Flood, but the SMG worked fine.

“Aww hell” he murmured to himself, trying to scrape off the Flood juices from his perfectly clean combat boots, shined every day at exactly 0500 hours sharp, with the exception of the last 48 hours. But even then he managed to keep them shiny as new, never a speck on them, until now.

He took out the SMG and clipped it to his ammo belt, hoping to find some extra ammo lying around for it. Hell, those damned Flood like our guns better than those crap plasma weapons. Proves they ain't as dumb as they look, and they're the damned most ugly things this side of the galaxy's ever seen.

"Come Humans, we must move quickly." The Arbiter turned and ran, the Zealots following. Being here sucks, he thought to himself. I'm stuck on this Godforsaken ring with no other marines, except for the good Commander Keyes, and all I've got are these 33 bullets and a pistol-worth of love. Better start looking for some extra ammo before I find myself being pumped full of it. Both he and Keyes jogged after the Elites, trying to stay just far enough away from surprises that could catch them off guard, but close enough where anything following would feel their wrath. Keyes looked ahead while Johnson searched the ground for something useful. Anything. He wasn't panicked or nervous, just pissed. Sure, they just made peace with a large part of the Covenant, one that could turn the tide of the war. But we're all stuck on this damned ring trying to find a way off, and I don't even have a good weapon to use.

The sun disappeared and the temperature began to drop, the sweat on his forehead cooled, reminding Johnson that he wasn't getting any younger. Being 45 in the UNSC as a marine sergeant and still in the field was worth applause. But after being diagnosed to die from Boren's Syndrome in around 2 years, he kept going on, knowing he could drop at any moment. But he was the most hardcore, badass marine in the Core, and no alien bastard or mutant freak would take him down. He'd make sure of that. The surroundings were a blur until he brushed a tree with his left arm, feeling a short sting. The burn was almost gone, even though it should have needed medical attention and a month or so to heal. It's only been a few hours and the burn was almost completely healed, one of the most fortunate side effects of finding the Flood. Although he didn't quite understand how it worked, Dr. Halsey had explained it to him once or twice. The first time he encountered the Flood, they overran his platoon, killing everyone except for Captain Jacob Keyes and himself. After some attacked him, they simply left him alone, and he was able to escape. After being bitten by the infection forms, he received some strange new abilities, like healing a hundred times faster than before and becoming faster and stronger. All his physical attributes were enhanced and he became more focused. He could pinpoint a single voice in a large room filled with marines blaring their crap music, and that's all he needed to know.

The group of Elites in front of him stopped, Keyes prepared to find cover. The Arbiter came over to them, making no noise, even under the foliage. “We have decided to enter using our camouflage so we may accomplish our goal quickly and quietly. Oracle, stay with the Humans. We will return shortly.”

“Understood”, Keyes said. “We’ll stay here and give support if necessary.” The Arbiter nodded and went on his way, soon out of sight.

“I wish I had some of that invisible equipment.” I’ve got the perfect locker rooms to use it with.

“Well Sergeant, your wish may come true. When we get off this ring and back to Earth, I’m sure we’ll trade technologies and start mass-producing them immediately. It may even become required to have such equipment for every marine very soon.”

“Then we’ll kick some serious Covenant ass, and they won’t have any idea of the world of pain brought onto them.”

Commander Keyes grinned at the thought, her shoulder length black hair swaying gently in the breeze. The dirt in it held it down, and the mud and blood stains all over her uniform could have won her a Hawaiian shirt contest, but it couldn’t keep her down. She’d been through a lot these last few days; being the only human ship in the system fighting the Covenant, finding another Halo, as well as coming across the largest Covenant fleet ever seen by any human.

She had gone through hell in a different fashion than most would consider. Every order she made was an almost guaranteed suicide mission to the marines, whether they knew it or not. Keyes did what she could to minimize the damage to her crew, but truthfully, she knew they stood little chance against such a massive force. Ordering anyone to their grave was always the hardest thing for any officer, but she showed nothing but hope in escaping and continuing the fight. Even while they were both captured by Tartarus, she stayed cooler than Johnson ever could.

What can I say? She’s her father’s daughter, and those Calamari think I’m a monkey’s uncle. Keyes pointed to a ridge left of them, making Johnson focus on the plasma fire coming from the center. Flood were coming out of nowhere, attacking in no orderly formation, but rather one at a time.

Maybe that’s how those plasma freaks have survived for so long.

The base was mildly fortified, having three stationary guns and a hovering platform carrying two snipers. Several Elites ran about wielding their energy swords, scorching Flood to goo, while others simply fired from very safe positions. They undoubtedly awaited extraction, or at least a hand from anyone who could help. “This must be their lucky day.”

“Johnson,” Keyes chirped, almost scaring the man, “I’m receiving a, wait, what the...?” Looking up to his superior officer bearing one eyebrow higher than the other, she looked around for a second, then back at him. “I was getting a message from Cortana, and then it faded out. All she said was the beginning to some Coordinates, but not enough to find wherever it was. Wait, I’m getting another transmission...”

Getting up and standing tall, Johnson made a subconscious look of impatience. Although he’d never show it, finding more marines or Cortana made him very excited, and for good reason. The idea of fighting alongside marines was always his favorite pastime, and would always be. He felt adrenaline start to pump through him, only waiting for those few words to come out of Keyes’ mouth.

“A group of marines is just over that ridge, having the same problem as these guys are.”

“Then let’s go pull their asses out of there.”

Just as he turned, Johnson felt a small hand grasp his shoulder, bearing force, but nothing that would harm him. “We can’t, or at least I can’t.” Thrusting his head back towards Keyes and shaking her hand away, he looked at her with one eye. She had just lifted her gaze from the ground to his eyes, showing the tiredness in her face, yet the fire in her eyes glowed brighter than ever. “Our main objective is to return to Earth, and with our new alliance, we both will have to follow the Arbiter. If we don’t, it may be the end of the human race. If we need to make a quick getaway and we’re off somewhere else, they will leave without us, and there’ll be no way to find them again.”

He immediately tensed, gritting his teeth and squeezing his weapon with all his strength. “What if we’re already too late? What if we get back to Earth and find just a smoldering rock?! Then what? The human race will be just us two. Some guys dream of that situation, but I know better. I’m going to get those marines out of there, and there isn’t anything that can stop me.” Moving away from her, he stopped, realizing what he had just said. “If I’m not back when the squidy’s are, go on without us.” Looking over his shoulder again, he smiled, saying “don’t worry ma’am, we’re marines. We know what we need to do.”

Running into the distance, Keyes watched Johnson go towards the horizon. She sighed, and 343 Guilty Spark dropped down to her level. “A most irrational reclamer.”

“Yeah,” she said, just under a whisper. “most irrational. Most human, to.”

Running from rock to rock was becoming tiresome for the Arbiter, whose

active camouflage ran ten times less than the Zealots' did. When we depart from this ring, I will modify this armor suit. Even my old less-honorable armor would be better suited for such a situation, and would surely allow a longer lifespan for me under such stress. Panting and watching the recharge complete, he contemplated the situation.

Our exit is clear, yet the entrance is filled with danger. The parasite attacks continually and never ceases, and those ten warriors keep them at bay. Perhaps a distraction will create a faster extraction. A blur passed by the Arbiter's view and crouched beside him, and then color flooded the clear being, showing the Zealot Commander. "Arbiter, we await your command."

"Commander, I have changed the battle plan. You and your Zealots are to take the place of those pinned here while I lead them back to our previous position. When I give the signal, engage active camouflage and return." The Commander pondered the plan, and then nodded in agreement. He sent out a wave of communiqués to his Zealots, encoded within it the strategy to be deployed.

Triggering his camouflage, the Arbiter dashed to the encampment, grabbed the closest Sangheili, and gave him orders to spread and fulfill. A few moments later, the ten remaining allies had gathered and the Arbiter sent the signal to the Zealots. They emerged from behind their hiding spots and cleared the area of all Flood, leaving the Arbiter to escape.

The commanding officer wore a dull red armor, dull from too much use and perhaps not enough servicing. But this veteran handled the situation as best as possible, keeping his command stable as well as the trainee's and Unngoy in check and mostly unafraid. This officer relinquished his command at first sight of the Arbiter and followed all of his instructions, as did the others. The Arbiter held the rear while the veteran led the way the Arbiter described.

The Zealots kept all arriving Flood distracted enough so they would not notice the string of Sangheili and Unngoy moving uphill. The Unngoy directly in front of him slipped on the edge and almost fell, but a mighty grasp from behind stopped gravity short. The pebbles that rolled down the hill hit a larger Flood form, who turned and saw the escaping group. It let out a shriek that almost deafened the Arbiter, who began to cover his hearing orifice but refused the instinct. Rather, he pinged a plasma grenade and tossed it at the Flood form, grasping its upper torso and exploding it moments later.

"Continue on until you are out of sight. I will keep these beasts at bay." With that, the Arbiter grabbed his sword with his right hand and activated it,

the bright white blade sparking to life. He leaped from the path and slid down the rocky slope, bent down far and keeping steady with his left hand. At double the range for him to lunge the parasite, the Arbiter leaped through the air, jumping right in the middle of now several Flood forms. Before landing, he lifted his legs as high as possible and reached his sword arm low, and then just as his targets came into range, he twisted the sword between his fingers. A rush of warm green liquid came from the beasts, all dismembered. Landing, the Arbiter saw two left, both on either side of him. They discharged their human weapons on him and he quickly lunged at the one to his left, then threw his sword straight through his final victim. The remains of both bodies dropped along with the sword, whose blade returned to its sheath upon landing.

When he turned back to his previous position, the group was nowhere to be seen. "Zealots, our path is clear!" Activating his camouflage, all but one of the Zealots disappeared, the final one battling more Flood. Footsteps approached and passed him, but the Arbiter continued to watch the lone Sangheili warrior. His camouflage deactivated, but he didn't notice.

The Zealot slashed one target and another, never allowing any Flood to reach him. Then three rushed him at once, all from equidistant angles, only allowing two to leave this reality by the blade. The last one he punched, but the Zealot's entire arm simply went through it, stuck inside the beast's flesh. More parasites came from the rear, but the Zealot did not allow death to claim him. He jumped off the ground and pushed off the parasite with both legs, allowing him flight to the two attackers, who met a doomed fate. The beast with a gap in its flesh was pushed back into four more attackers, but exploded only a moment later, allowing the Zealot the single moment necessary to stealthily exit the battleground. As though awakening from a trance, the Arbiter ran up the path, eager to leave.

Crouch-walking above the supposed position of the remaining marines, Sergeant Johnson heard the gunfire and screams of battle. Thankfully, and unfortunately, the screams were inhuman. Straightening up to see over the rocks in front of him, a smile grew on the man's face as he saw marines holding off those body thieves.

Now how am I gonna get down there, pull them out, and get back in time for the party? The first idea was to just yell to the marines to get up here while he fired all his guns and scare off those freaks, but he figured out all too quick that it wouldn't work. But he knew he'd have to get down there. And fast.

The situation was getting worse. The Flood was closing in on the marines. Closing the perimeter. It wasn't because the marines were bad-shots or weren't trying, but there wasn't any single thing they did. They fought like the Flood; each individual entity doing what it wanted. And without any cohesion, the marines were falling apart.

Johnson aimed and fired his final three bursts with the beam rifle at the 'Yellow Jello' closest to the base and bolted down the hill. He threw it like a spear at the same freak and pulled out and fired his SMG, dropping the Flood form and finishing his clip. Just ten meters from the base another greenish-yellow blob ran towards him, flailing its arms wildly. Johnson grabbed his boot pistol and shot off its right leg with six shots, and it fell right on what should be its face. Double-timing it to the base, he unclipped a grenade and dropped it on the squirming Flood and ran into the base.

"Who's in charge of this platoon!?" the Sergeant said, the grenade exploding just as he finished. Almost all of the marines stopped firing and looked at him in utter shock, obviously not knowing what was going on. "Hey, don't stop firing those weapons! I like my marines alive and movin!"

The apparent rookies were too green to react quickly enough to Johnson and three scum-suckers flew at them. Johnson instinctively aimed and fired, but only heard the click of an empty clip. "Shit, I'm empty!"

"Hey, Sarge," some Latino accented marine yelled, "this'll make you feel better." He tossed three SMG clips to the Sergeant, who now showed all his teeth.

"I owe you one, marine." As soon as it clicked in place, he unleashed a torrent on any unfortunate soul (do they have souls?) that was stupid enough to get in the way of his bullet hose. Now all but one marine was firing their weapons and dropping the Flood bastards attacking them, making it seem to easy.

Just as things seemed to be going well, several shots rang out from across the no-man's-land, and the chaingun stopped firing. Johnson shot a glance to it, and ran to it as fast as he could. He knew it was the main line of defense and held the perimeter together, at least on this side. He pushed the dead marine off the seat and cringed when the body hit the ground, but still knew what he had to do.

Practically jumping in the seat, the absence of gunfire let a large cluster of Flood close in on that side, and Johnson pulled the trigger. Each bullet cut out all other noise, while scum suckers dropped like flies. But how long can we keep this up? It's been way over five minutes, and they've probably left. Damnit! What do I do now?

“Sarge, above us!” Now what? He shot a glance up and saw a phantom floating right over them, and he had no clue whether it was a friendly or not.

“Sergeant, I’ve got you your ride”, broke out from some intercom system from the Phantom, the voice of Commander Keyes. The Phantom opened fire on the attacking Flood, giving the marines an escape route, as well as a lot of leeway.

“Marines, get under that grav-lift. It’s a long story, and I’ll explain it on the way.”

“Anything’s better than this, Sarge!” They all followed his orders but kept firing at any targets of opportunity. Johnson knew that the three turrets on the Phantom couldn’t hold off the Flood, so he picked up the chaingun and fired it, walking backwards at the same time. His arms shook violently, and he was barely able to hold the damned gun, but he did anyways. Firing over 600 rounds a minute was no easy feat, and he held it with his bare hands, walking backwards to the extraction area. Flood appeared out of nowhere, but he downed them as soon as they came into sight. The bullet cage for it cut off and depleted the gun in only a few seconds, and he dropped it and made a mad dash for the lift, which got him up with time to spare. It was turning out to be a good day.

Chapter 12

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 12

First Age of Rebirth/Yielding Righteousness/Preeminent Flagship

The Supreme Commander walked into the temple, his steady pace making him appear to hover above the ground as well as a Todstilla Ordidor. His white armor reflected the luminous purple lighting used in this holy sanctuary. Scanning the room, he spotted his target.

The Arbiter.

Walking over to him immediately alerted all honor guards present in a 20-foot radius, yet they all turned away when they saw who came forth. Now beside the Arbiter, he fell on his knees, bowed, and whispered a short prayer. Straightening up, his eyes turned and locked onto the Arbiter, who sat in a meditative stance, both arms as though they held a ball and eyes closed.

As he opened his mouth to speak, the ball was broken, and the General found one hand held up, indicating both silence and acknowledgement. Standing up, the Arbiter followed suit, slowly opening his eyes, and was led out of the temple, yet in no rush.

The Arbiter turned back towards the temple and gazed upon its magnificence. The peace he received during each meditation here astounded him, as though he belonged in this temple, and no other.

Perhaps this ship, and no other. With that, he left his sanctuary to continue his holy mission. His duty.

“Your report, Commander.”

“Yes, Arbiter. As you know, the fleet engaged the holy world one fifth of a revolution ago. Although our forces are still gathering, I have been able to assemble a small fleet, and can arrive there in 15 cycles and engage our enemies.”

“How many ships?”

The Supreme Commander paused, which the Arbiter knew was a bad sign. Because they only had less than two hours before leaving the second ring, bringing together a decent group of ships together could be considered a miracle. Yet would it be enough? “There are 20, Arbiter.”

The Arbiter turned and paced, deep in thought. The Commander looked

down, as though he had failed his mission, only to be surprised by the Arbiter's quick reply. "It will have to do. Find your most trusted soldier and task him to collect all remaining forces. And thank Captain Noiz again for his incredible service to us." The Arbiter looked him directly in the eyes. "Now tell me, what of our guests?"

"The Humans remain unseen by all aboard, and can remain so indefinitely. However, communication with them has been...abnormal."

"How so?"

"I believe that the ring may have translated our languages to us instantly, allowing our mutual understanding. Without it, our only means of communication is to speak in their simple language, which most of us do not understand."

"I see." The Arbiter turned away once more, facing a large window that showed the blackness of space, which was blocked by those ships ready to be sent, possibly to the slaughter. If all went well, many Covenant ships, with officers who knew nothing of the Prophets' treachery would learn of it, and attempt a takeover of that vessel. The number of acquired ships, however, would be impossible to determine.

"Order the fleet to engage."

The General bowed gently, then turned and headed for the door. As it opened, the Arbiter, almost whispering but with enough force to grab the Commander's attention said, "Personally."

Astonished and in shock, the General turned towards the Arbiter, with his thoughts showing on his face. "Arbiter, you wish me to lead the fleet?"

The Arbiter faced his general, keeping a steady gaze. Kneeling to one knee, the General said, "Arbiter, I cannot take this honor away from you," and bowed his head.

The Arbiter walked over and placed his hand upon the broad shoulder.

"You must, as more important matters await my immediate attention. Now rise, and do as I command, Commander. Give Noiz control of a fourth of the fleet, and command the rest. And take the Human with you, the one whom we agreed upon."

Looking up, he rose and rushed to the door, knowing his mission could wait no longer. Just as the door opened, the General craned his head back.

"But what of yourself, Arbiter? Can I not assist you in any way?"

Smiling, the Arbiter shook his head. "My mission is to find this 'ark', before the Prophets do. They undoubtedly know its location, and once they complete their journey to the holy world, I fear that it will be their next destination. I must secure it before this can happen, and find whatever secrets it holds."

“I understand.” He turned and ran out the door, leaving the Arbiter alone once again. Looking out the window, thoughts rushed through his mind. One thing that had always eluded the Arbiter was fate. He understood that everything had a certain path for their lives, yet he always wondered whether what he was doing was his fate. Born into the warrior caste and becoming the general of the armies showed how formidable of an opponent he was to anyone and anything.

But is this what is supposed to be? Only a few days before, he could never have imagined such a drastic turn of events, for both himself and the entire Covenant. What was the cause of this? More questions ran through his mind, but he focused on one and tried to explain it.

The Parasite! That was where difficulties first arose. The feeble humans stood no chance, even though some of their tactics and weapons were quite effective; it was only a matter of time before their complete extermination. But when the single human ship, the Pillar of Autumn, landed on the first ring, and the Parasite attacked, problems arose. With the difficulty in destroying the Parasite, and with the constant barrage from the humans and their Demon, there was little chance he could stop the destruction of the ring.

And even the second ring brought forth similar problems, except he led no one. Stripped of his command position and rank, there was only the blade in his hands to guide him. Yet the addition of the Brutes to the Covenant seemed minor, his failure at the first ring allowed them leeway no species has ever had in the covenant. It was then that their treachery became known, as well as the Prophet’s deceitful act towards the Sangheili.

No. This is where fate has brought me, and for good reason. If the Parasite hadn’t appeared, he never would have become the Arbiter. And the first ring would have been activated, destroying all of them. And even if the Demon had stopped that from happening, it would undoubtedly happen on the second ring. Fate was not to blame for this heresy. The Prophets were.

“Perhaps I may be of assistance?” The familiar voice startled the Arbiter, as his plasma rifle was aimed directly at the eye of 343 Guilty Spark.

“Oracle!” Immediately harnessing his weapon and calming himself, he shook his head, confused at how its presence had been masked from him.

“How did you enter this room?”

“Why, there is an interesting system of passages that contain the gases your species uses to breathe, such as Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbon Dio...”

“Ahh, Oracle, you came through the air passageways. A clever way to circulate throughout the ship. However, to answer your question, I could use information.”

“Splendid! How may I be of service?” This machine was interesting, having emotions, and floated through the air with no equipment seemingly being used. It almost seemed like another living being, other than its looks.

“I would like to know about the Humans.”

“Humans? Oh, species classified number 001.” Species 001? “Yes, the reclaimers have quite an interesting history, having war after war, and always having so many...”

“Wait, you claim them to be the first species you encountered, and you call them reclaimers. Surely, other species have come before us to the rings.”

“Of course, and they were disposed of by the Flood.”

“But if this is true, why are they the first species listed in your databank? Why are they the reclaimers?”

“Because they were designated to be the only species allowed to commence the activation of any ring.”

I am asking the wrong question! The Arbiter thought for a moment, and then stared directly into the large, blue eye. “Oracle, who created the rings?”

Chapter 13

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 13

1900 Hours, October 23, 2552 (Personal Time)
Aboard Preeminent Flagship Yielding Righteousness
Slipspace

Walking behind the Arbiter, every marine in rows of two followed the much larger Elite walking through a hall, the floating flashlight right behind him. Sergeant Johnson's face was grim. He couldn't get used to the fact that he was not on an enemy's ship. It pissed him off, because whenever anything came around any corner, he would want to blow their heads off. He came close a few times but the marines caught him and held him down. And every time the Arbiter looked back at the rustling noise, a couple marines always whistled and looked away from him, pretending not to notice.

The different shades of purple were already annoying Johnson, as if the Covenant didn't believe any other color was available for construction. The floor was always a light magenta, and stubbed for increased friction. Yet regardless of the amount, the color always kept the busy flagship calm. No color was too sharp or hard to incite any fierce action, but he knew better than to let his guard down.

Fazio and Mendez were whispering and snickering to each other, only to both be smacked on their heads. The hand that dealt it came from the group's initial leader, specialist Glusman.

Looking large and ferocious was his main quality, but not him. Even standing still most people looked at him with some questionable fear. After talking to him, Johnson's view changed completely, seeing Glusman to be an intelligent individual who certainly knew what he was doing, and joined the Core for all the right reasons.

Johnson cursed at not being able to deal the pain out himself, but the changed look on the marines' faces was almost enough to reconcile that thought.

The four marines who were with him on the Covenant ship, with the exception of Glusman, were the greenest soldiers he'd ever seen, but he'd make men out of them yet. A couple Elites walked past the group, pointing

at the two now-quiet marines and the one behind them, letting out some strange noise he'd only heard once before, when the Zealots fell over from his 'monkey's uncle' statement.

"Come Humans, we are almost at our destination." The Arbiter's voice kept low and calm, like those damned purple walls.

"Hey light bulb, quit hummin', I can barely hear myself exist."

Still hovering over their heads, the Monitor turned itself so that its 'eye' faced Johnson. "If you don't mind, please call me by my name. I am 343 Guilty Spark."

"I'll think about it. In the meantime, be a good lantern and shut up." The two noisy marines broke out in laughter, the other two barely cracking a smile.

343 sped past Johnson and hovered next to the Arbiter, turning to him.

"These reclaimers are not very friendly. Why was the other sent away?"

Grinning, the Arbiter spoke while looking straight ahead. "The Human needed to leave for the benefit of the Human species. As for these Humans, they will help us uncover the mystery of the Ark. They have proven to be most necessary for us of Forerunner technology.

The flashlight sounded like it sighed, but Johnson knew it didn't breathe.

"Yes, these reclaimers do seem to have an affinity for such things."

Walking through a few more doors, they entered a large room filled with Elites, all fighting with each other. A training room. Hundreds of them fought, wrestled, fired their weapons at targets, and other things that were too far to see. The size of the room shocked every marine, as it was so large that the end could not be seen. The Arbiter continued through, the rest following him.

Scoping out everything occurring was a thought that bombarded Johnson, but he also saw no use in it as they were now at peace with this octopus race. Still, he watched with moderate curiosity, but was unable to satisfy it at all. Every one of them stopped all action at the sight of the humans, feeling a certain inbred disgust for them. The feeling was mutual. The Arbiter noticed and stopped, craning his neck. "Why have you ceased your training? Our next battle may be our last, and you make such idle time?!" They continued, but not as before, doing only very simple maneuvers.

"You must excuse them, for they have not accepted the sudden change in power as quickly as I have. They will in time. Come, we will go to the bridge." Crossing the 'gym', the doors in front of them opened and those two marines started snickering again. Johnson looked back and saw one of them flicking off everything in that room. He reached over with an open

hand and pummeled the back of the marines head with it. He made sure the marine would feel the pain.

“Hey Sarge, what was that for?!”

“Don’t give me none of your lip, marine! You know what you did. Do it again and you’ll have more things to worry about in your sleep than on the battlefield.” The marine let out a loud gulp, while his drinking partner stood straight shaking, laughing hard but not letting it out. “Don’t think the same doesn’t go for you, princess. When we get back to base camp, it’ll be toothbrush duty for you.”

Reaching the bridge only a minute later, the Arbiter took the central seat, the captain’s chair. “Helm, how long until we reach the coordinates the Oracle gave?”

The Elite at the front turned his seat and faced the Arbiter, the mildly light room barely illuminating its armor. “In a few moments, we will exit slipspace.”

“Excellent. Oracle, what should we expect from the Ark?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. According to protocol, I will have to send an encoded signal on a certain frequency and we should be admitted.”

The intertwining web of dimensions opened up and showed normal space, the vessel flowing through gently. The sight was strange and quite unexpected. “There is nothing here. Oracle, are these coordinates correct?”

“Of course. This is where the Ark is, approximately 600,000 kilometers away.” Everyone looked out the view port, but confusion ensued. The Elites at consoles typed away, searching for an answer to the riddle.

“Wait a second”, Johnson said, “why aren’t there any stars in that large region directly ahead of us? We did leave slipspace, didn’t we?”

“Arbiter”, a voice came from the helm, “I read a massive gravity well directly ahead of us, larger than anything ever recorded. It is pulling us in slowly, but our distance keeps us safe. Recalibrating to orbit the gravity well.”

Glusman took a step forward, looking at the view port and seeing the completely black circle, with bright stars all around it, but none within. It felt like they wanted to fill it with their light. “Is that a black hole?”

343 hovered over to Glusman and looked at him, turning curiously. “Why, yes, it is. How did you know that?”

“Well, I used to be an astronomy junkie, and quite a few ancient scientists and mathematicians theorized their existence, and even proved it mathematically, but we’ve never found one. Except for here, of course.”

The Arbiter rose and turned to Glusman and 343. “What is this ‘black

hole'?"

343 hovered a meter forward and its 'eye' brightened up. "A black hole is a celestial object with a gravitational field."

"Wait, how long will it take you to say define it?" Glusman was not a fan of wasting time, nor did he care to listen to something for extended periods of time.

"Two minutes and 34 seconds."

"That's what I thought. Arbiter, here's the short and sweet version: It's a presence that is so dense that it remains small, but has a huge gravity. All you need to know is that if we enter the event horizon, we're all dead.

That's the point in space where, if you pass, nothing will be able to stop the black hole's gravity from pulling you in."

Nodding his head, the Arbiter turned back to back to the view port, also noticing the strange pattern of light around it. "And what of all the stars around it? Why do they surround it?"

"Simple. Because of its huge gravity, all the light from the other side that isn't sucked inside the black hole is bent by the intense gravity, making it look as though it surrounds it."

"I think I understand. Is there a way to know this event horizon you speak of?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure 343 can calculate it for you much easier." The orb was looking down, as though it was saddened by being silenced, but looked up quickly at hearing its own possible use.

"Yes, well, this black hole's radius indicates that the event horizon is about ten thousand kilometers off this vessels bow. Should we pass it, this vessel will be quite devoid of all matter, except for me."

"Huh? How would you survive? You are also made of matter."

"Quite simply, I myself could be considered a black hole, although the effects I should have against my surroundings have been neutralized. The material I am made from is known in your language as bisepthexium, which would be on the Human's periodic table of elements as number 276. Due to its great mass and density for being a single atom, my creators decided to build me using it but in great quantities, so they simply used high-pressure systems to create my high-density structure. This required a barrier for my existence to not destroy any other beings, and my creators built within me a self contained rotating magnetic-electric field with an extremely high yield, causing a dispersion of all atoms to be pushed away from me as easily as they are pulled, making equilibrium between me and my surroundings."

Both the humans and Elites looked at each other for a moment in awe,

completely dumbstruck by everything they had just heard. Glusman looked back towards the black hole, seeing nothing but empty space.

“Right...so how do we get in? You said there was some special code?”

“That is correct. I will send the frequency now.” They stood and waited, the Arbiter sitting back into his seat.

“So, what’s supposed to happen? I mean, for us to know whether or not it worked?” The modest marine spoke up, Johnson thought to himself.

“Don’t worry son, it’ll work. You wait and see.”

The helm officer’s console began making noise furiously. “Arbiter, the gravity well is changing. A cataclysm effect seems to be taking place, and we may not be safe at this distance.”

“Hold position. We are in trustworthy hands.” In his faith, the Arbiter was rewarded by a spectacle.

Brilliant light came forth from the darkness, overwhelming everyone on the bridge. Every color came out and seemed to attack the ship, but simply illuminated it. This cloud of light continued growing, and then burst open, showing a bright but small white light in the very center. The rest of the colors rotated beautifully around it, slowly and serenely.

“Magnificent, these creations of our lords,” the Arbiter said. “Now let us go and search within it, and find our ‘path to salvation’.”

Chapter 14

By Sir_Brilliant

Section 3

Neutral Territory

Chapter 14

1500 Oct. 21, 2552 (Military Time)
Cairo Space Station, Orbiting Earth
Bridge

The deck felt cold and dry, and the world around was too alienated to comprehend completely. Admiral Hood stood on the bridge of the Cairo staring at the stars, not noticing any of the five repair teams in that room alone, as well as the huge maelstrom of vessels now on constant perimeter patrol. His only concern was the stars, the ones that were, are, and that always will be. The only constant in his universe, at least for the moment. Before, the UNSC was a constant to him. Even after losing most of its territory to the Covenant, the thought of the UNSC being completely gone, destroyed, obliterated...it was preposterous. Out of the question. In fact, he

didn't know a single marine who would think differently, except for possibly the Spartans, which he also had his doubts about. Nevertheless, it was a past thought, one he would either learn much from or die trying. The stars' beauty comforted him, allowed him the moment of relaxation he needed so desperately. For the last 72 hours, his job consisted of either wiping out any remaining Covenant forces before they could make landfall or simply cleaning up the mess they made, neither of which was his chosen line of work. He felt as though he wasn't doing enough, as though he should pick up a gun and help out the marines under his command. It has been so long, and due to Hood's admiral status and his exemplary line of duty, that he was appointed duty to EarthCore, where his life's mission was to ensure the safety of Earth, under all circumstances. Of course, smarter and younger personnel were also part of the organization, so he had been given the honorary role of fleet commander. The first thought Hood had ten years back was simple. Do I want this? Hell yeah I do. Wouldn't give it up for, well, the world. But now things were different. Now the battle was on his turf, his area of expertise, and yet he was not a true part of it. Most of the work done was from simply ordering the targets to fire at and when to fire. Sure, it was an important role to fulfill, but also something a green lieutenant commander could achieve.

Several large battle cruisers blocked his view then passed, lights along their hulls blinking. Even with such a fleet, the largest fleet ever seen in history was preparing to attack them, and they were at the wrong end of the trigger. There was no avoiding it, the only choice they had was to fight. But what was really bothering Hood was the special ONI ships going around and doing "special scans". He had no idea what they were up to, and even when in direct contact with them, no answers were given. There were areas marked where no UNSC ships could go, but he could not understand why. Whatever they're up to, it better help us out.

There were also several reports of missing vessels, but he didn't have the time or resources to find them. And with a battle as big as it would be, a couple ships wouldn't change the tide of battle in their favor. Not without more captains like Captain Keyes. The memory brought some comfort to him, as Captain Keyes was one of the most decorated and renowned captains in the UNSC. His battles were known by all, stories that kids talked about at school. If only there were more like him...

Hood suddenly realized how quiet the room was, and looked around, noting it completely empty. The repair crews must have finished their work here. The silence overtook him and he didn't trust it. It seemed too quiet,

as though he was in the eye of the storm. That's when all hell broke loose. White light flooded his vision, the light from slipspace ruptures. Covenant vessels were jumping out of slipspace right in the middle of the orbital battle clusters, and their weapons looked hot and ready to fire. An old man found strength in himself, the fire burning within, keeping him from death. "All UNSC vessels, engage enemy contacts! Open fire on any non-human son of a bitch flying in Earth-space! All super Mac guns, search for lead Covenant vessels and get them out of my sky." Volleys of Covenant plasma were thrown at UNSC ships, but they sent back enough heavy fire to suppress a planet.

The incoming fleet was small, around 30 ships, none that could be considered capital class. Something was amiss, because the first volley from the allied ships all but destroyed the small fleet, making them burn bright as the sun for a moment. Hood turned his head to the left, forcing himself to think. His eyes widened when he realized it. It's a decoy! "All UNSC forces, we just destroyed the decoy and took the bait. Be ready to destroy any dropships and boarding parties that may enter the system." No sooner had the words left his mouth that dropships flew out in all directions, scattering across frigates, corvettes, cruisers, and orbital stations. Many lit up like firefly's, then exhausted their oxygen and simply floated dead in space, but too many caught their targets and started deploying troops. "Send out all Longsword and Ulysses fighters to take out those dropships, even if they're still attached to the hull of any ship. Those boarding parties have to be stopped, or they'll wipe us out."

Lord Hood turned to the tactical display that was positioned to his right, the large charted graph showing every Covenant and UNSC vessel alike, all on the two dimensional board. The decoy seemed too easy to rid of, as though the Covenant didn't think the force defending earth would be anything to worry about. They were in for a big surprise.

The bridge was now full of personnel, all at computer stations and operating as fast as they could. Hood couldn't help but wish Cortana was around, knowing she would be able to do all their work, and maybe even his, and do a better job than all of them. "Status report."

"Sir, 90% of all vessels show optimal condition, 5% have sustained critical damage and may be out for the fight, and the rest have only minor damage. They are making field repairs now. 80% of all boarding parties were stopped before they could reach any target, and the rest are being taken care of now. There are too many reports to give a definite answer on that situation, but most seem positive." The voice was that of a young woman, most likely in her mid 20's. Strength carried through her voice, reassuring

Lord Hood, who still held some doubts for victory. If every soldier held that strength...

"I want you to find the rest of that fleet, and let me know everything about it. Ship sizes, amount, location, even their breakfasts. Our last run was a lucky one, and if we're not ready this time, then we might as well hand our heads over on a silver platter. Send all ships with critical damage to the back ranks; we'll use them for support and long-range fire. If their weapons are down, make sure they're back up pronto."

"Aye aye, sir." He looked over to the communications officer, a small man with large glasses, typing fast and loud. The screen reflected off his glasses, giving his eyes a blue glow.

"Son, I want to you patch me through to the entire fleet."

"One moment sir...ok, you're on"

"The entire fleet will be split up into six groupings. All fighters and bombers will now be registered as group Alpha, and will be led by Commander Helstrum. The fighters will be responsible for giving cover to any and all bombing fleets, who in turn will immobilize any possible capital vessels possible, or at least take out their weapons. Any remaining fighters will give cover to out larger ships and take out any of those Seraph fighters."

"Group Beta will be all Super Mac Stations, both those orbiting the Earth and the Moon, as well as any ships incapacitated and were set to long-range combat. This group is the power behind every attack, and will coordinate with all other groups to find weaknesses in the Covenant battle structure or among certain vessels. I will lead this group."

"Groups Gamma, Delta, Epsilon and Omega will consist of all remaining vessels. All vessels should remain mobile at all times. All Corvettes and Frigates should coordinate each attack with at least one other ship to increase the attack strength, as well as finish off engagements quickly. No ship goes alone, anywhere, at any time. If your vessel loses all weapons systems and is unable to make field repairs, then initiate an overload of the core and set a collision course for the largest Covenant bastard near you, and get the hell out of there. Fleet Admiral Harper will command these groups or assign another to lead them."

Sighing, Lord Hood knew that he was doing the right thing. There was only one thing left unfinished, the most important one of all. "Today will be the last day for many of us. But this day will never be forgotten. I've seen the way those alien bastards fight and there isn't a single reason in the universe that we wouldn't send their sorry asses back to whatever pitiful excuse for a hole they crawled out of. I won't lie to you. They're

strong, they're powerful, and on almost every account we've been pushed back farther and farther here and now have nothing left. Nothing left but Earth."

"Earth. The cradle of humanity. The one place they want, but we can't ever let them have. Many of you think this is the last time you'll ever see that blue planet again, or at least while it's still blue. But no, we will win. As long as even one of us is breathing, we will keep fighting, and never surrender. Nothing can make us lose. So let's show them what the hell we're here to do! Lets show them that their first mistake was messing with the UNSC! 'Cause in the Core, we never back down! In fact, I've already got a declaration for their defeat written out, waiting on my desk for them to sign it. And I won't stop fighting until I see some squid gibberish on it." Making a cutting motion across his neck, the Comm. Officer tapped a few keys, and then started clapping. The entire bridge followed, with cheers and whistles coming from every direction. They were pumped up, ready to fight, and give their lives if necessary. "Settle down people! We've got a job to do." He looked back out the window, and out to the stars. They had never been more beautiful.

Going 278 kph didn't usually feel slow, but flying in his squadron at that mid-range speed today seemed very different than normal. Hell, today's a lot different than normal. Norman Helstrum turned the stick of the Ulysses-class fighter gently left, bringing him about. The rest of the ships in his company followed suit perfectly, almost bringing a tear to his eye. Yeah right.

"Hey flyboy, what's the status with those dropships?" he said over the comm. It wasn't to any specific pilot in his company or even the entire fleets-worth of fighter craft, but he still wanted the answer.

"Sir! All dropships and boarding parties have been taken care of, sir!"

"Good. Everyone who needs repair and refit better do it now, cause you ain't gettin a chance later on."

"Yes sir! Right away sir!" The same voice of a whiney sounding pilot went through his ears, both annoying him and noting that someone listened. Helstrum hated things like that, where something he liked and hated came in the same package. Like his wife...

"Why don't you take the pole out, Sach. I think the Commander's had enough ass-kissing for one day."

"Shut the hell up Jan. Nobody asked for your opinion."

"Actually, I'm sponsored by the rest of the UNSC to make sure people like you can do something well other than brown-nose higher ranked

officers.”

“Can it you two! Get back for refit now, and I don’t want to hear another one of your pansy asses making another peep unless it’s you getting blown up. Understood?”

They both said in unison “Yes sir”. He knew that everyone else was laughing their asses off, and he would too, if not for his high rank.

Thankfully they were smart enough to keep their comm. systems off, because if he heard all the laughter he might have joined in. Not the greatest thing to have on your military record that you laughed at lower officers.

The ship roared across the empty space, and he set the controls to auto-pilot to the nearest capital ship. Letting go of the stick, Helstrum reached down into his right pocket and pulled out a pocket knife, showing the blade and making ready to use it. On the left wall of the small fighter craft, rows of lines were scratched into the interior of the ship. Tediously scrapping off bare metal with his titanium knife, three more bars were placed on the wall. How many is that, 400 yet? Damn, I can’t count all of these now. And I don’t really want to either. I’ll get that tight-ass Sach to count them for me. I’m sure he’ll be more than willing to.

One cruiser grew on his screen, and kept growing until it filled it completely. The side wall read “Reach”. The paint looked fresh, and several faded out letters continued along the hull. Changed after we lost it. Wonder what it was before. “This is Commander Helstrum, coming in for repair and refit.”

“Authorizing. The gates are opening, Commander. Have a nice stay with us at the Birmin-, I mean, the Reach.” Helstrum chuckled at the light humor of the AI construct aboard, who obviously had more of a sense of humor than most of the guys out here. They’re all war heroes or dead soldiers. No comedic sidekicks or roles of any kind. The ship went through a large opening, and then stopped momentarily for the room to pressurize. The hatch above opened and he flew to where the arrows pointed to, seeing a group of marines who weren’t doing anything.

Gaining speed, warning lights blinked on his HUD, but he ignored them. The marines in front around 300 meters still didn’t notice him, but they were about to. The small fighter immediately hit the brakes, using the air resistance as a huge force against the ship’s inertia. The ground shook and tools fell off of tables and all the marines turned to look, only to jump out of the way. Helstrum stopped just three meters short of them, popped open his cockpit and shoved himself free of the seat. “Hey kids, got a little free time on your hands?”

A couple of them mumbled something under their breath, but ran the tubes and weapons into the Ulysses fast enough for him to let them off easy. Helstrum was about to sit back down when he saw one of them sneaking away. "Hey, you!" The kid turned around and was wearing a flight jacket, and was obviously not supposed to be here. "What are you doing in here still?! If I don't see you with your hunk of metal outside this ship yesterday, you're gonna have to worry about a lot more than the Covenant. Got that?!"

He nodded nervously and ran off, too quick, and probably for his own good. Kids. Hell, I don't even know why we let them fight. I'd better keep an eye on that one. Red light flashed through the landing bay and a voice came over the PA, that of Lord Hood. "Slipspace ruptures! Covenant are attacking. All hands to battle stations!"

"Get that stuff done now! I'm outta here!" Dropping back into the cockpit, he grabbed the latch and shut the top, pressurizing the vessel. All systems showed green, and he took off. Flying fast again triggered the fail-safe's and warning, all of which he ignored, and left the Reach. Seeing the outside gave him a shock, with the huge amount of Covenant vessels that jumped into the system. Hundreds of them were around, all firing their weapons and meaning business.

"Computer, open comm. channel. All fighters and bombers, group up and attack in waves of at least five. Give cover to anyone who needs it, especially to the bombers. All bombers, find where the Covenant's largest ships and blow the hell out of them. Wait for them to fire their weapons then go through their shields if you can, and set proximity mines. They will be expecting us. And give 'em a warm welcome. This is their first visit to Earth."

Pushing down on the afterburners, Helstrum felt seven, then nine g's on him, but he didn't slow down. His lance mates were coming about, following his lead. "We're looking for any Covenant bastard letting loose their Seraph fighters, they'll make easy targets to take out. I've armed all of our ships with tactical nukes, but you can't fire it anywhere but inside the Covenant ships."

"Wait, you mean we're going in them?"

"That's right Sach. Each one should be able to wipe out a capital class piece-o-crap from here to kingdom come. There's a 30 second fuse on each one, so after you fire it, be sure to get your ass out of there. Otherwise, you'll just make the fire bigger."

"Got it sir! Give us a target and I'll send 'em back where they came."

"That's what I want to hear. Two targets right now, one at 1 o'clock, the

other at-”

“Sir, bogies coming in fast, at three- by one o’ clock!”

“Scatter. Jan and Sach, take out those bastards. I’m goin in for the kill. Ramirez, give me cover.”

The Covenant cruiser ahead was at least two and half clicks long, hurling molten plasma at a nearby frigate. Seraph fighters poured out a small hole on the bottom, and he found his destination. He sent the nav point to Ramirez, who rocketed ahead and let loose on the Seraph fighters with a barrage of missiles, crippling few and making the rest crash into each other. A line of fire seemed to come out of the vessel, and Helstrum turned his Ulysses to fly right into that opening. Fire swooped all around the meager ship, and more Seraph fighters poured out of the opening.

Avoiding them took all his effort and concentration, but he managed to hold the ship together. The confused Covenant fighters avoided him as well, not having any idea what it was, and he gave them no chance to worry about it.

Light poured through, and the end was near. The Ulysses fighter quickly turned upright and saw hundreds of Seraph fighters and thousands of Covenant troops in the huge landing bay, at least ten times the size of Reach’s. Pulling up one of the safety cover’s on his control panel, Helstrum punched the key, letting loose all hell. Now Seraph fighters, as well as another small ship he’d never seen before, were firing at him, and his Ulysses wasn’t plasma friendly. Hitting the afterburners, he pulled the stick as hard as he could up, trying to get out of the enemy ship. “Missile away everyone! Get outta here now!”

The opening he initially came out from started to close, and his fighter craft rocketed towards it, not exactly fitting through. The doors broke and the hull shook violently, but he kept control. There were still Seraph’s inside the tunnel, going too slow for his taste. But his afterburners were dead, and there was no time to wait for them to recharge. “Computer, set all energy to engines!” The balances system was thrown off completely, but his new high speed came near 500 kph, which was damned fast, unless he didn’t make it.

Running into at least 10 other ships and the hull of the capital ship he was still in, his timer read 7 seconds. At least 12 g’s were on him right now, but he knew he wouldn’t make it with this speed. The afterburners were only a quarter charged, but that had to be enough. Then a plan struck him.

One unfortunate Seraph fighter he passed started firing upon his Ulysses, but exploded violently, the missiles he fired that moved slower than he did hitting their target. His speed increased and the afterburners were on full

throttle, as well as the engines. The ship whined, but he'd make it. I'd better make it. I've lost enough ships already.

Reaching the end with only three seconds left, the Frigate he passed before was smoldering, nothing but a wreckage now. The 15 g's he pulled started to make Helstrum black out, but he kept pushing on the throttle, and then felt the shockwave of the blast. The fighter was flung away, and it spun radically. All control was lost for a good ten seconds, and then he caught the control and slowed to a halt.

Breathing in deeply, Helstrum sighed, and then yelled. "Hell yeah! Mark another one for me!"

"Sir! Nice work, but we've still got more work to do."

"Then lets get to it Ramirez. Get Jan and Sach over here. I've got two more puppies waiting to leave their cage, and so do the three of you. And I'm not leaving anywhere till I get 500 kills."

Walking back and forth in the small cramped room, Fred waited impatiently for the new weapons to be in his hands. It wasn't just because of anticipation for it, but because the battle overhead would soon reach ground, and he felt unprepared for it. Linda sat back across from him, twiddling two .50 caliber bullets between her fingers as nimbly as she would with her own hand, showing a precision with her armor that he lacked.

The metallic room gave no comfort, only the coldness of steel. No reflective surfaces of any sort, with only a row of fluorescent lights overhead to keep the room alive. Glancing at Will, a combat knife sat between two fingers with the blade pointed down, and a bullet kept right under it, pointing to the wall away from them all. Suddenly interesting Fred, he thought he saw Will move his hand, just barely. Then the two fingers separated and gravity took hold of the knife, dropping it. The two Spartans waited for it to land, and the waiting seemed too long.

On their left, a door swung open, letting in a short rush of air that pushed the knife off course, making it collapse on top of the bullet and hit the ground. Both of them looked up quickly, and a lieutenant saluted to the Spartans rigidly. "Sirs, it will just be another minute. Excuse us for the inconvenience." With that, the marine turned just as he entered and closed the door.

"Another variable I overlooked." Will shook his head, then set the bullet in its previous position and made new calculations. Fred walked away and paced again, thinking of the battle just a few hundred miles away. How are we doing? Can we win it, or will it come down to Earth? To us? More

questions came, but no answers could, but Fred kept himself from making any bad outcomes to the battle. No matter what happened, he knew that the Covenant would get groundside during the battle; it was just a matter of time. They did so on Reach and they'd do it again here.

This kept him calm, the simplicity of all Covenant battle strategies that were on such a large scale. They seemed to follow a simple code on how to take a planet, and never deviated from it, with the exception of Reach. But they had good reason for doing so, to find the artifact, which the Master Chief had been able to take with the rest of the Spartans and get off the planet. And with the previous attack on Earth just a few days earlier, they knew something was here that the Covenant wanted, and would sacrifice countless lives for. What it was didn't matter, because with all the searching and expeditions sent in the last two days, nothing was found, even with the coordinates that the Covenant used to locate whatever it was. Regardless, they'd be ready for the ensuing attack, and hopefully the new weapons will make their work easier. Nothing would make every marine's life better than a gun that could eliminate any alien bastard twice as fast as before. At least, that's what he was told.

The door swung open again and Fred turned to look again, when in the corner of his eye he saw the knife drop again. Initially, he thought, wow, twice in a row, but the knife connected to the butt of the bullet and it shot off. It ricocheted off the wall and bounced twice, then heading straight for the marine that entered the room, Linda's hand reached up and stopped it just two meters short of the man's face. Her shields flared for a second, and she tossed the bullet back to Will. "I see you're having a great time. Why don't you let me make your day and give you some new toys?" The marine waved his arm in a gesture to follow, and they all walked after him. In a private comm. channel that Will opened, he said "I had it under control. The bullet was going to miss him by half a centimeter."

Linda made a fist and was about to punch his shoulder, but thought better of it, for both their suits. "You forgot to add in the wind factor after he opened the door."

"No, I added that in, and it still would have missed."

"How about the limp in his left leg that made him lean on his left side a few centimeters more than normal? And that he was inhaling just before the bullet hit, making him lean farther left?"

Fred cut in. "We can worry about that later. Now cut the chatter, and let's give the man a nice smile. It's not every day you get a new gun made for you." The Spartans walked into the workshop, a colorful room with every wall covered with assortments of antique weaponry, shields, and armor.

Most of it came from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but there were other's from the medieval period and from the war of 2296. Most of the material was in need of dusting, but one small portion was very clean, and also very recent. It was covered with Covenant weaponry, as well as several of the more recent UNSC standard guns.

"Looks like a nice place to hide out in case of Covenant bombardment."

"Not really, my boy. You see, most of these guns are useless nowadays, and most of them don't even have workable ammunition with them. I just keep them as showpieces and sentimental value. Come, I have the new ones here."

Walking over to a single large table that was covered with a white cloth, the man threw it off in a clichéd fashion, which still worked quite well.

Three large black guns sat silently, gleaming reflections and showing a certain grace that widened every Spartan eyes. One was obviously an assault rifle, another a sniper rifle, but the third eluded them. Two arms grabbed the assault rifle, and the older man hoisted it upright.

"This is SB73, or the Gritter, as I like to call it. Has three modes, all shown here on this switch. Fully automatic, semi-automatic, which gives a three bullet burst, and the SB, which is the single burst. The scope on top features 2X and 5X modes, as well as night vision. I didn't add the heat vision because I know it would be a waste, with everyone very easily able to see any of those colorful bastards. I'm sure you'll agree." He handed it over to Fred, who immediately inspected it. "Uses standard and explosive rounds, although the armor piercing rounds didn't work in the testing trials. I didn't have the time to fix that, although I'm sure it'll handle just fine."

"This is the GMMOR2 Sniper rifle, and this gun is definitely one of my best. I've improved the scope to work at 5X, 10X, and now 20X as well. It also carries night vision and has an extra bullet for each clip, giving five shots before reload. And, this is the best part, watch the shaft" he said emphatically, pulling a switch on the side of the gun. The shaft twinged momentarily, but seemed the same. "Did you see it? That's for the .70 caliber mode, which uses these new and improved rounds that can and will penetrate any helmet or facial armor you fire at. I've also improved the firing rate, making it about one and a half times faster." Linda almost grabbed the gun from his hands, but he let go with haste, knowing better than to hold it.

"Last, but not least, we have the QQ22, or the fragbox. This gun lets out a high intensity blast like that of the Covenant Fuel Rod Canon, but I've put that in a Jackhammer rocket and increased the power on it. Can be used

both with manual aim and targeted, and also features a new 'large creature' lock, that enables it to lock onto anything moving with a certain mass, like a Hunter. The only downside to this is that it leaks a small dose of radiation, although I'm still undergoing tests to fix the problem, and should finish that soon. In the meantime, this is yours. But be careful, because whenever you use it, it will take about half your shields out. The radiation won't hurt you or the suit, but only as long as your shields are up. And anyone near you will feel it too, so don't stand too close to any friends."

The man was somewhat disappointed because he couldn't see the faces of the Spartans who wielded his weapons, but he knew better than to question them. "So, what do you think?"

Fred held the gun with his right hand and looked up to the man, who held a hopeful look in his eyes. Although they were all excited about the new weapons, this man was just as excited about giving them out, in seeing their use by serious military personnel. It was probably a dream come true for this man, and Fred didn't want to let him down. But he was quite pleased with his weapon as well, and could easily tell that Linda was as well. Will, on the other hand...

"They're excellent sir, and we'll be using them as soon as we get into battle. But right now, we've got to go. Thank you for the weaponry."

The man's face lit up, and a smile overtook his face. "It was my pleasure, sonny. Now go and kick some ass." The Spartans saluted and the old man returned it generously, and they exited the room. Each one fondled their weapon gently, searching it thoroughly when a communiqué came through.

"Spartans, the first Covenant have hit ground just two clicks south of your position. We're sending you a Warthog, so be ready."

"Acknowledged. Now we'll see how good these things are."

The entire station rumbled as another Covenant boarding party latched onto the hull of the Cairo, cutting into it to spread out and take over the station. "Admiral, we've got hostiles on levels 23 and 24 in sector 5!"

"Send firing teams down to deal with the problem. I want a status report on the Détente and Necromancer and I want it twenty minutes ago."

"Sir, both ships have too much damage to continue fighting. All weapons systems are down, as well as propulsion and life support. They have another couple of minutes of airtime, but with the openings in the hull all over them, I don't know how much longer they'll last."

"Tell them to evacuate immediately, and get fighter squad 14 to cover their

safe return to the closest station. Get two squads of fighters to get those boarding ships off our backs. Send out any additional pilots we have and get them out there to give us cover. Have we got levels 36 and 38 locked down?"

"Yes, but they're breaking through them too fast. If we don't flush out the air or open the hull, they'll be around the station before we know it."

"If we have no personnel down there, suck out all the air. Cut off all access panels to it off limits to everyone and make sure that they all are dead. Any news from the division seven fleet?"

"None sir. ONI hasn't initiated any use of it, and for all we know, it doesn't exist. But if it did, they may be waiting for something to happen before entering the battle."

The Cairo rocked from another ton of depleted uranium shot out at one 40% the speed of light, the shot cutting through the shields of a Covenant vessel designated 48. The shields died as the round made a clean circle right in the heart of the ship, destroying it. The ship floated dead in space.

"Send Delta fleet over to sectors 1321-1325 to assist Gamma fleet with the capital ships. Have the Quebec and Albany coordinate their fire to take down the capital ship within that cluster. Do we have enough power to-"

"Sir! Three heavy capital ships are on an approach vector directly towards us. We won't have time to take them all out!"

"All available ships, we need immediate assistance. Three heavy capital ships are engaging to our position, and will be in direct firing positions before we can eliminate them. I repeat, all available ships, attack the registered vessels."

Pivoting the Ulysses fighter into a direct line of fire towards the Seraph fighter, Helstrum let loose a barrage of bullets from the .90 caliber chaingun attached to the bottom center of his Ulysses. The rounds ate through the ship like it was butter on hot metal. It turned hard left, then right; the pilot inside must have lost control. Slamming on the afterburners, the enemy vessel was only 200 meters from him, and he pulled the trigger again once he had a lock on it. This time, it wasn't getting away.

The finished Seraph floated dead in space when Helstrum turned his ship back towards his squadron. It felt emptier without Ramirez, who took a direct hit after going inside his second choice of targets. Thankfully, it didn't completely destroy his ship, and he was able to activate the rest of the nukes, damaging every Covenant vessel within a mile radius of the blast. And all the UNSC vessels were kept well informed and scattered very quickly. What a way to go out.

Now Helstrum only had one nuke left, and there were way too many ships around to choose from. Nor did he care to spend the next hour and a half thinking about which one would be it. He needed to find a Covenant battle cruiser that was close to any UNSC vessel or orbital platform where he could go for refuel and reload, which was exactly what he needed. There was enough fuel to make it anywhere and back, but not for long, and with only 400 bullets and one nuke left, the breeze was feeling cool on his bare ass.

The comm. broke open relaying a message on all frequencies. "All available ships, we need immediate assistance. Three heavy capital ships are engaging to our position, and will be in direct firing positions before we can eliminate them. I repeat, all available ships, attack the registered vessels." Recognizing the voice instantly, he set a target accordingly and opened a channel to his squad.

"Alright team, we're going to help out the Cairo. Nobody is in close enough proximity to give the necessary assistance, and I think that if all three of us can take out those measly Covenant bastards, we'll all get kisses from the admiral. Any questions?"

"Yeah, he said we have to take out two of those ships. That means one of us isn't going in. And that's going to be..."

"You, Jan. I need you to cover the both of us before we get inside. I know, I know, you want to get the kill, but I don't trust Sach in keeping my ass clean of any Covenant bastards."

"I don't trust anything that has your ass and clean in the same sentence," Sach said under his breath, just loud enough to be heard but quiet enough to pretend that he didn't mean to be heard. Jan laughed out loud and gave the go ahead.

"Admiral, this is gold leader of Squadron 19. We'll take out two of those cruisers; just tell us which ones you want out of your sky."

"With all due respect gold leader, how do you intend on taking out those cruisers?"

"Sir, you may not have been informed of this, but my squad has been packing some serious firepower. Each of our ships has been holding and using nukes on the Covenant ships, and setting them off inside their hulls, cutting out the EMP blast but totaling the ship."

"I see. Fine, we're sending you the coordinates and information now. Don't miss, we don't have time to evacuate, and I sure as hell don't like seeing this crap on my screen."

"Consider it done. Set afterburners to full, we want to get there before the Cairo is seen on milk cartons." The ship accelerated much faster than he

had anticipated, but Helstrum took it like a man. Pulling a few extra g's because he made a calculated error didn't bother him, as long as he didn't black out. This time he cut it close, seeing dark patches appear before his eyes, but the afterburners cut out and he shook it off. At his current speed, it was only another minute or so before he reached his target.

"Ok Sach, you go for the closer target and make it quick. I'll go farther and we'll leave the last one to the big guns. Jan, as soon as we're both inside, get inside the Cairo for refit and reload. And if we don't make it out, get the hell outta there. It'll be having fireworks like you've never seen."

"Got it. Just make your runs fast; I don't want to wait too long doing nothing. I get bored easily, you know."

"Consider it done. See you on the other side." Thirty seconds until he reached the designated target, Helstrum looked at his wall of memorabilia again, and pondered. I wonder whether this'll do it for me...

Chapter 15

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 15

1835 Hours, Oct. 21, 2552 (Military Time) / East Los Angeles district/
North American Continent
Southern Platform

Pushing farther on the throttle and changing gears, the Warthog roared down the abandoned streets of LA, buildings both hundreds and decades of years old lay in ruins. Few that stood tall were covered with the dust of a thousand sandstorms, and no amount of cleaning material would ever wipe off the barrage they had taken. The dust tried to overtake the windshield of the Warthog, but Fred pulled a small lever to the right of the steering wheel, spraying a water/soap mixture onto it while the wipers cleaned it thoroughly. The Spartans set the visual receptors in their helmets to night vision, which although being a bright hour of the day, cleared the dust from their sight.

Linda, sitting in the passenger seat and carrying her new sniper rifle on her shoulder, grabbed the handle and turned it upright, looking through the scope. The noise of it zooming in had not changed from the normal model, always a welcome noise. "Firing spotted up ahead. We'll reach them in about half a minute."

"Any targets you can take out?"

"Nothing is visible, even with the night vision. And I doubt the bullet will travel straight in this dust storm."

"That's fine. Take Will's new rocket launcher and be ready to use it. Will, keep ready on the gauss cannon. You'll be the only one defending us while Linda's reloading."

"Don't worry. I'm sure that I'll have just as many CK's as Linda, if not more. Just set up the target and they'll eat a special metal to my liking."

Both Linda and Fred glanced at each other, both of them smiling.

"Man down! Man down! We need that artillery brought here immediately! Perez, Lucas, I want firing positions set up on the eastern and northern sections of this encampment! And where the hell are those reinfo-"

"Incoming!" Everyone ducked for cover when a huge explosion rocked

the entire base, scrambling omega leader's insides. There were too many of them and not enough time or firepower on his side to keep the enemy at bay for much longer. He'd been promised reinforcements, but they had only a few minutes left before there was nothing to reinforce.

"Firing teams, hold the line! If we don't hold out for reinforcements, we're all screwed. And if that happens, you won't have to worry about those alien bastards. It'll be me who feeds lead into your guts. Liperre, where's that artillery!?"

"The artillery has been surrounded and is being taken out. They're just two clicks south of here, but we won't be able to reach them in time." In the corner of his eye, a green blob floated towards them slowly, but by the time Rogers turned to look, it was already on Liperre. The plasma bolt discharge of a plasma pistol began eating away at the man's head, but it shook so violently that the helmet was thrown off and disintegrated while the man took whatever plasma left in his hair out. Rogers crouched down and let out a burst on a Grunt directly at ten 'o clock. The rounds pierced its head and dropped it, giving him the chance to check on his marine.

"I'm fine sir, just a scratch and some lost hair. We've only got twenty men left, and I don't think they'll be able to hold the perimeter for much longer. We need to evacuate right-" Plasma bolts flew overhead and both turned and discharged their weapons in the direction of fire, hoping to get a clean hit.

"Get back, I'll hold it here! Prepare to evacu-"

"Sir! Look!" The marine pointed towards where they just fired, and a Warthog flew through the air, landing and crushing several grunts. The brakes screeched loudly, deafening both of them, and an Elite flew off into the distance, too far to be seen. The gauss cannon on the back fired over and over again, each shot hitting its desired target.

"Holy cow, I don't believe it," Rogers said in disbelief. "Would have never guessed that we'd get a Spartan to give us a hand. Well, what are you waiting for? Now's your chance to get out of here. Regroup the men and tell them to set up base at coordinates 030022."

"Yes sir!" Liperre ran off, while Rogers went over to the Warthog. The three Spartans within it simply stunned him, almost too much for words. But he forced them out of his mouth.

"Sirs, thanks for the help. We've been pinned down here for two hours. I've just sent my best marine to regroup the rest of our force, but I don't think we'll have enough to do anything on our own. Our communications systems have been taken out, and we could use a lift out of here."

The Spartan nodded, and in the massive suit of armor it wore, Rogers

wondered whether he was already signaling a pickup team or doing something else. Solitaire might be fun. “Sir, we were supposed to have artillery sent here to give us a hand, but they were stopped by Covenant forces two clicks back in that direction,” pointing to seven thirty. “I’m sure if they’re still there, they could use a hand.”

“We’re on it. Pelican’s gonna pick you up. ETA three minutes. Be ready; Covenant ships are coming out of nowhere. They might try to stop you if they get the chance. Don’t give it to them.”

“Yes sir!” He saluted rigidly, and the Spartan returned it, then threw the car into reverse and slammed on the gas, careening the Warthog back. Maneuvering it around, it kept going even after he switched back to normal driving mode, and left a huge trail of dust in its wake. Rogers walked out to where the Warthog had just been, and saw a single Elite lying on the ground, struggling to reach its plasma rifle. Walking over to it, he picked up the gun and the Elite grabbed hold of his leg, but its grip was weak. Pointing the gun at its head, disgust filled his entire being, as the bodies of more marines lay in the background of his vision. “Welcome to Earth.” With that, the charred face showed no emotion, and the hand attached to his leg weakened, never to rise again.

“Yes chief, the last report we received from artillery unit 273 was recorded just half an hour ago. They reported to be just shy of where you stated. All communication was severed as they were under radio silence, so not to compromise their position.”

Looks like that failed miserably. “We’ll investigate the last recorded position. Keep me informed of any changes on the battle overhead and anything that happens down here.”

“Understood. Comm. station 32 over and out.” The sandstorm had stopped, but there was no in this town. The ruins were enormous, a sight to behold. They refused to take it lightly, and Fred pushed a little harder on the gas.

“Look on the bright side,” Linda said while looking out into the horizon, “at least we can see where we’re going. Better to fall into hell with the senses you trust than heaven without any of them.”

“That’s questionable, but for another time. Will, get that gauss cannon ready, we’re approaching the perimeter. Linda, take out any stragglers that aren’t our own. If anyone spots our forces, let the rest of us know immediately, and we’ll get them to safety. Without the good intel I wanted, we’re going in blind.”

Two acknowledgement lights blinked on his HUD as the Warthog tore

through the sand dune. The horizon ahead was shaky from the intense heat of 55° Centigrade; although their internal suit temperature kept cool enough for each of them. Pushing down the clutch and sending the vehicle into 6th gear, the engine roared and their destination neared quickly. The Warthog's radar showed no motion whatsoever, which was a bad sign. Especially since the armory trucks were now visible in the distance, and no movement meant either no survivors or that they all escaped. Or were hiding in the ruins.

Coming up on the coordinates set, heavy tanks and artillery were scorched, burnt, twisted in ways Fred didn't think possible. There wasn't too much of it, enough to count using only his own hands. He stopped the car and left the keys in the ignition, jumped out, and waved for Linda to follow. Will was about to come along as well, but Fred showed the 'halt' signal, and Will stayed with the car.

Readying the new assault rifle, Fred set it to single-shot burst to keep any attacker at bay while allowing his aim to be perfect. It would make sure the recoil couldn't stunt any later shots. If a Grunt or Jackal, or anything else with or without shields was simply unprepared for their arrival, his first shot could take out the target. If there was anything he may not be able to take on so easily, the switch to automatic fire was right next to the trigger. "Radio silence unless they find the Warthog or anyone finds survivors.

Clear?" Both gave thumbs up, remembering not to use the suit to suit signal transfer system to show acknowledgement and other functions.

When attacking the Unyielding Hierophant, they were found because they used that simple communiqué, and their position was found with pinpoint accuracy. That mistake cost a life, and Fred would not soon forget it.

Small walkways through the seemingly abandoned artillery unit led Fred and Linda through the charred metal and ground. All motion sensor readings were fuzzy, mainly due to fires that raged within and around all vehicles. Fred crouched at a corner and sneaked a glance past it, not seeing anything of worry, but feeling the situation wasn't right, he waved for Linda to move ahead while he covered her. She did so wielding the M6C standard UNSC pistol, and from the way she held it, he knew that every moment holding the almost useless weapon reminded her of earlier days when the Spartans used only weapons specially designed for them. The M6D pistol was a much more powerful weapon, and although the M6C was much better than nothing, it wasn't nearly strong enough for Linda's standards, let alone any other Spartan's. But they managed.

Now watching their rear, which was perfectly clear although too open for his liking, Fred stopped when Linda held up a fist, then motioned with

fingers to her eyes and pointed directly ahead. Fred looked ahead to where she pointed, but couldn't see what she was looking at. Picking up the assault rifle, he started to look through it, but was stopped by his partner, who covered the lens. She pointed to where her ears were, and Fred understood that the magnification lens makes a sound when changing its intensity, and leveled it. She quietly pulled out her sniper rifle and a small metallic pole from the left leg of her suit from a compartment he'd never seen before. Screwing the metallic piece to the sniper rifle, she aimed and fired it, the shot being almost utterly silent, the pole acting as a perfect silencer.

Where she got that and when she changed that piece on her suit, I have to know. Just as the body dropped, he recognized it at a Grunt, the small yet bulky armor hitting the ground with a thud. Several more gathered around it, as well as Jackals and Drones, who flew on top of a fallen tank, looking down upon the body. Linda let loose another four rounds, dropping the Drones and a Jackal, and then waved Fred in when she pulled out another clip to reload.

Rushing in, the Grunts were too surprised to do anything but stay still, making easy targets. Each single shot burst instantly dropped one Grunt after another, until none were left standing. This was too easy. Unless it was a trap... He felt two more sniper rounds fly by his left shoulder all too close, but looking to its target, he found two downed Elites, their active camouflage wearing off. Another one came from his right from inside a tank, throwing all its weight on him. It slammed its hand palm-up into his helmet. He quickly maneuvered himself into a strangle hold over the Elite, but it simply dropped and slipped through his grab.

Now able to get a better look at it, the gold armored Elite turned towards Linda's position and leaned back very quickly, another round almost hitting its head. Two more came and connected to its shields, which held, but Fred knew it was an opportunity not to be taken lightly. He switched to fully automatic and fired at the Elite, who jumped off the burning artillery truck and landed behind cover. Starting to chase it, a communiqué came through on priority alert.

"I'm taking heavy fire back at the Warthog. Don't know how long I'll hold them off. There're too many of them!" Fred took a mad glance at Linda who already started on her way back, leaving Fred to take out his target. But time was against him, as in almost all situations, no matter how hard he tried. Unclipping a grenade from his belt, Fred took out the safety pin and rolled it towards the last known area the Elite was at, and made a dash back to the Warthog and Will. The explosion didn't let him know

whether the target was down, but he was pretty sure that it wouldn't come back to haunt him.

Will crouched on the back of the Warthog, waiting for something to happen. He knew that at the moment, he was unprepared, but confident that whatever might or could come at him he could take out with minimal damage, all of which would be only to his shields. Watching the sky, he pondered on the power and magnitude of the vessels fighting above, and when some exploded they shown bright as the sky, making another one in its wake, and giving his shadow a larger, stronger twin.

He wondered about the outcome of the battle, what special preparations were made by the UNSC and any other secretive government organization that may have a finger in it. And more than anything else, he wondered about John and Kelly, his fellow Spartans, not gone, just lost.

John was off on another expedition of his, which always seemed to be some vacation when he was gone, but more like another war when he returned, with stories to tell. The one of Halo was amazing, to say the least. Some of the things he'd heard sounded preposterous, ridiculous, and utterly unsound, even for a Spartan, and yet he believed every word of it. When the Spartans were children, they were taught every single major battle ever recorded in the history of Earth. Every Spartan, regardless of how exhausted or tired they were from their calisthenics training, was always wide awake to see and learn about everything that had happened. That single story from his CO was the best he ever heard, and possibly the best he would ever hear, depending on how well they would fare in the next day or so.

Something seemed to move in the corner of his eye, and Will jerked the gauss cannon towards it so fast that any normal person would have whiplash. But there nothing was, nothing but shadows of a defeated ally. Easing up a bit, he set his motion sensors to maximum range and sensitivity, not really wanting to be caught off guard. But he could have sworn that something was there...

Again something caught in his peripheral vision, and he waited this time, eyeing his motion sensors, waiting for them to indicate that he was right. Waiting for the enemy to come out of hiding, or at least the demons plaguing him to be proven nonexistent. Just then, his suspicions were proven correct, and the motion sensor displayed one, no...two targets approaching at four 'o clock. Turning the gauss cannon around, he let loose two shots, each one eliminating the targets utterly and devastatingly. Both were Grunts, the one in front with a terminal hole where its abdomen

should be and the other beheaded.

He realized that the shots he let out would alert others, and kept himself quite alert. A fully charged plasma bolt streaked slowly towards him, and hearing it, he ducked behind the cover the gauss cannon gave, and let loose another barrage. More enemies fell, but he could hear the footsteps of more coming. There were too many of them, and he wasn't sure whether he could take them all on. Not without cover and a good plan.

They rushed him, and he cycled through rounds as fast as possible, letting out more fire from the cannon. He opened a channel to the other Spartans. "I'm taking heavy fire back at the Warthog. Don't know how long I'll hold them off. There're too many of them!" They kept coming and he kept firing. A Grunt primed a plasma grenade and threw it just before he could take it out, and it sailed through the air. The aim was too close to the Warthog, and Will jumped over the cannon and into the driver's seat where the engine was still running, and slammed on the gas.

Only a second later did the back of the car fly into the air, but the Warthog kept together. He drove around the attacking vectors he'd noticed and caught up with Fred and Linda, who were all too happy to see the back of the car. Only then had he noticed that the back tires were completely dead and on fire, giving them the idea to leave the car.

"Comm. station 32, we need a pickup at sector 290618. When can we get it?"

"The closest thing we have is two minutes away. Sending now."

"Negative command. Tell them to pick us up in five. We have some unfinished business to attend to. Spartan -104 out. Will, take point. Lead us to them. Linda, take the rear, make sure nothing we spotted decides that it's too good for death. Light weapons; let's make this fast and quiet."

They moved quickly, backtracking to their original position, but kept some distance from of it when their motion sensors went off. Will turned the corner and counted several Brutes and Elites, while most of the Grunts and Jackal's where only on the ground, moving as much as the burning artillery behind them. Fred motioned for Linda to find a secure sniping spot and alert them when she was ready: She'd take out most of the targets if she could. Will and Fred would act as support. The only thing they worried about were the Drones that may attack her, something they didn't normally have to worry about until the first attack on Earth. Times change...

Giving the go ahead, Linda let loose five shots, dropping all the brutes and stunning an Elite while taking down its shields, giving Fred the one-hit-kill he'd wanted all day. Then he and Will came out guns blazing, mowing

down Elites and Drones alike. “Grenade!” came from behind them, and both jumped for cover as it exploded and let loose a torrent of sand into the air, and tore through the remaining Covenant forces on this side of the city. All air traffic was halted except for their ship, which wasn’t due in for another minute or so, and all airwaves were quiet. All except those from space.

The Spartans took a moment to listen in on the conversations taking place, the barking of orders to take evasive maneuvers, to fire all weapons and evacuate the ships, to rearm and repair any and all fighters. “Damn wish we could help”, Will said bluntly. He kicked a rock underfoot and ended up crushing it, but it didn’t matter.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get our share. Just you wait.” The Pelican came right on schedule, the downward thrusters throwing sand in every direction. The Spartans ran in, eager to get out of the graveyard they’d just seen and added residency to, and didn’t feel comfortable in it any longer.

“Sirs, we’ve been ordered to take you to sector 620384 immediately. A huge Covenant force is building there, and you’re leading our troops. Our ETA is two hours. I’d suggest you catch some z’s while you can, cause it’s gonna be one hell of a ride after we land.”

Chapter 16

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 16

0800, Oct. 22, 2552 (Personal Time)
Airborne, ETA 2 minutes

Nudging the clip into his SB73 rifle, Fred looked out from the dropship, staring blankly into the spectacle only a few hundred miles above him. Several explosions shone brighter than the sun, but only for a brief moment, not willing to take away from its glory.

The Pelican made a sharp right, making him grab the railing above, and moving several bags of assorted armaments the Spartans had taken along. A sack holding his QQ22 rocket/plasma launcher and at least twenty rounds started slipping, only to be forced back by a mighty grasp. Linda looked up at Will, clutching the bag. "I wanna keep these near me at all times."

Fred smiled as he turned, even though he knew neither of them could see it. But he also knew that they were smiling as well. Yet as he looked at the roomy interior of the Pelican, his smile dissipated, as he remembered how only a month ago, or about three weeks according to real time, he commanded a Pelican filled with Spartans. Now, only the three of them, the Master Chief, and Kelly were all that was left of the Spartans.

The time distorting phenomenon that occurred due to the crystal they found on Reach was excessively puzzling, or maybe it's just me, thought Fred. Even Cortana had only theories, which she herself said showed no promising data. Only Doctor Halsey seemed to understand how it worked, but she never mentioned it to anyone.

What he was really worried about was whether the crystal was destroyed or not. Fred understood why they had to leave it, because it warped Slipspace and sent out a signal the Covenant could track, but he couldn't help but wonder what the Covenant could do with it. If they knew how to use it, couldn't they just send a few ships back a couple hundred years ago and wipe out humanity?

Fred shook his head, knowing that this wasn't the time to be figuring out their fates. "Status report", he radioed to both the pilots and his Spartans. "We have dust-off in one minute, chief."

Two acknowledgement lights blinked on his HUD. Fred turned to Linda. "I want you on sniping duty. I don't want anything non-human able to count to three before getting lead poisoning. Will, take the fragbox and its ammo, as well as the Lotus tank mines. Set them up immediately after dust-off."

"Why does he get all the fun?" After mopping up the remaining Covenant from the first attack, everybody lightened up. Even Will, who was usually quiet. But their fun was short lived, as a transmission cut through.

"This is Major General Nicholas Strauss calling all Spartans, over."

Surprised, Fred snapped a look at Will and Linda, then keyed in a reply.

"This is Spartan -104 reporting, sir."

"Good. Chief, I'm gonna be frank with you. Our intel suggests an unclassified ship headed to your area. We know it's full of some important Covenant figures, and there are incoming dropships from all vectors to your position. I don't know or care what they want, but I want you to give them a warm welcome. Any questions?"

"Yes sir. Estimated amount of resistance?"

The signal broke out into static as they leaped from the Pelican. "I'm sure there'll be enough for you to have fun. We'll give you air support and are sending more troops to you."

"Acknowledged."

"Oh, and one more thing. The Master Chief is aboard that ship, so don't fire at everything that comes out of it. Strauss out."

Fred stopped, and quickly turned around to see if the others had heard. Acknowledgement lights blinked, and he tapped his helmet twice and pointed up. Their suits communication system searched for another Spartan signal, and found John's.

"Sorry Master Chief, but you're already coming in. You'll reach the atmosphere in 30 seconds. Grab hold of something steady and good luck. Admiral Hood out."

Fred looked back at Will and Linda, figuring out what exactly was happening. "Send an Acknowledgement signal to John; let him know we're here. Linda, go over to Nav Alpha and set up camp there. Will, go over to Nav Beta and do the same. I want this area secure before the Covenant land."

The Master Chief hung onto the nearest wall, searing through Slipspace on the Forerunner ship the Prophets had taken from Delta Halo. He barely made it onto the ship, and could only hope that it wasn't headed for Earth. But because the Covenant knew Earth's location, the Chief knew his

hopes were in vain.

The space outside returned to normal, indicating that they had left Slipspace. But looking outside gave no comfort, as hundreds of Covenant and UNSC battleships fired at each other, and even more floated dead in space.

His suit's radio flickered to life, and a marine's voice came through. "I've got a new contact, unknown classification."

"It isn't one of ours. Take it out." It was Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood, who was undoubtedly still on the Cairo Super Mac station, which the Chief saw in the distance.

"This is Spartan 117. Can anyone hear me? Over."

There was a brief pause, and the Admiral's voice came over the comm. again. "Master Chief, you mind telling me what you're doing on that ship?"

"Sir, finishing this fight."

"Aye aye, Chief. Marine, cancel all firing on that vessel. Master Chief, what is your status?"

"Sir, the leader of the Covenant is onboard this ship, in search of something they consider to be a spiritual item. I have no information on it, but I do know that this ship is full of honor guards with upgraded weaponry and shields."

"Hmmm, an interesting turn of events." There was a brief pause, then the admiral continued. "Alright Chief, here's your new mission. I want you to capture that leader of theirs. And find out what this thing they're searching for."

"Sir, with all due respect, this ship should not be allowed to land."

"Sorry Chief, but you're already coming in. You'll hit atmosphere in 30 seconds. Grab hold of something steady and good luck. Admiral Hood out."

The Master Chief braced for impact, and waited. His heads up display popped up on his helmet's screen, and he saw three acknowledgement lights blinking, each on by another member of his team. A big smile broke out on his face, only to be forced away by ship's violent shaking from Earth's atmosphere. Barely holding on, he continued to stare at his HUD, barely noticing the outside battle.

He sent a reply message, his own acknowledgement signal, to let them know he was there for them, and was coming to help. All he wanted to do since he left Earth only a few days ago was to lead his team into battle, and it seemed that he would finally get that chance.

The ship shook again, tossing his body onto the ceiling, making a very

loud thud, and waking the chief. He didn't even get a chance to sleep, and in the one moment of thought, he fell asleep, only to be rudely awakened. After two days of intense fighting, and only a few short breaks and stimulants, the Chief deserved a few hours of sleep, but didn't take minutes. He always insisted to stay on duty, never showing any weakness. But the bags under his eyes grew heavier by the minute, and at the moment, nothing could possibly hurt him.

So he placed his gun on the floor, now that gravity was back, and he sat down, resting his head on the wall. He figured it would take at least five minutes to land, so he closed his eyes, remembering how his old CPO Chief Mendez used to tell them, "You can sleep when you're dead. But if your hand can't hold a gun up straight, you're as good as dead. So get some sleep, marine."

Chapter 17

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 17

0830, Oct. 22, 2552 (Personal Time)/ New York Outskirts
North American Continent

“Move that equipment double time! Get the western perimeter secure! And where are those stationary guns?!” Fred’s voice roared through his external speakers as he barked orders to the marines assigned on the northern corner of the entire perimeter to finish setting up the encampment. He needed the surrounding area clear and ready for a major Covenant invasion. Fred’s orders were to make sure the Covenant was on a suicide mission.

With only 300 marines at his disposal, his arsenal was extremely short-handed compared to the coming force. Fortunately, he had learned many tactics of how to defend a small base with a small force against a much larger opposition and be able to hold out, if necessary, indefinitely. High-comm had been generous enough to give at least double the required armaments, for a force three times their size, if not more, as well as a promise for reinforcements. He knew, however, that the latter wouldn’t make it.

Fred knew that the only way the covenant could land their forces was to have their dropships directly over the LZ. Therefore, he set Will in charge of dispersing all of the M19 SSM Rocket Launchers, or Jackhammers, to as many marines capable of using them, and positioning them for peak performance. He had to take out as many dropships as possible before they could touch land.

He also knew that Covenant forces would come from the ground as well, and even though the area was next to a plateau and surrounded by mountains, some would come through there. Linda gave sniper rifles plus extra ammo to all marines she saw fit, which were too few. She took over 200 rounds for herself, which put Fred in awe. But in this situation, there was no such thing as ‘too cautious’.

Her job was to make sure that anything non-human that stepped foot in a kilometer radius of the encampment was taking a dirt nap before it could even think of pulling the trigger. She also put all snipers in perfect

positions all around the base, where even Fred had trouble spotting them. "Chief, ETA in 30 seconds," blared through his Mjolnir armor suit, coming from a nervous officer, probably still green.

"Acknowledged. Keep me informed, warrant officer. Spartan -104 out." Another 20 minutes might not be enough to secure this new stronghold, but he didn't have a choice. The Covenant were coming, and he was throwing the welcome party.

"Marines, we have incoming contacts!"

A sergeant stood on his post, and yelled, "Everyone ready to kick some ass?" Cheers burst out, some of laughter, some of agreement, and all wanting to do just that.

Watching the marines, Fred couldn't help but think how sluggish and reckless they were. Of course, Spartans worked much more efficiently than everyone else because they were simply trained to be, but he couldn't help but worry about them. They couldn't win this fight. He pulled up his roster, seeing all the names of his team. They won't win.

No, Fred told himself. These marines are just as able as any Spartan, he repeated to himself. But the doubt still laid thick in his mind. He looked up, staring at the big blue sky, its color taking hold of his eyes. For the moment, he was at peace, but he knew it would be short lived, like the calm before the storm.

Only then Covenant dropships appeared over the mountains, blurring the sky. "Sir, we have visual contact. ETA in five, four,..."

"Will, initiate phase one." His acknowledgement light came to life on his screen, and Will's voice broke out loud and clear.

"All personnel with Jackhammers, lock on and fire at all targets on my command." Fred could feel the anticipation build, as he cocked his battle rifle. "Fire!"

Moments later, they screamed from their launchers, leaving a smoke trail behind. Fred counted 20 before they impacted on their targets: seven on the front two, four on the third and two on the last. The front two started falling, and didn't make it past the plateau. The third had spun around, and continued flying in the opposite direction.

The last, however, stayed on course. It came to the epicenter of the encampment, with a blue light emanating from its center. Fred had to act quickly. Ground forces this early could really diminish their chances of holding the base. "Will!"

"On it, blue one." His voice stayed hard and cold, just the way it should be. "Mendez, Scarfield, Jones, and Franky, fire volley two." As they fired, Fred could see Elites coming down the grav-lift, ready to start the

massacre.

The missiles impacted as the Elites were halfway down the lift, breaking its beam, as well as the ship. They fell at least 10 meters, barely landing on their feet. And just as they looked up, their own ship showed them who was getting massacred.

“Hell yeah!” and “Woo-hoo!” were the cries heard all around the base, as they watched the scorching dropship burn. When the small battle seemed like a huge victory, familiar sound ringed through Fred’s internal speakers. “Sniper”, yelled a marine, as others ran for cover. Looking across the field, he saw one marine, holding a sniper rifle single-handedly, and looking through the scope. Then he fired. The force of the shot hurled him off his feet, and Fred double-timed it to him.

“Sir, bogie down.” The man was in his 40’s, clutching his chest and his rifle, as the life faded from his eyes. Only then did Fred realize how they would win: with soldiers like this man.

Moving his arm aside, his chest revealed an overlarge cavity, with the heart having a huge gash in it. Even with no life in him, he still took out the target. No ordinary human could achieve such a feat, yet this marine did so with ease, defying both science and logic.

He grabbed the name tag off the marine’s uniform, and clipped onto the sniper rifle he had just picked off the ground. “Sir, this is comm. station 37. More incoming dropships. We estimate...15, sir.”

“Acknowledged”, his voice hard as diamonds. We’ll win because we will it. Because not even death can stop us from it. “Marines, mount up!” The real fight was on its way.

Panting wearily, Fred kept upright so not to appear exhausted, not wanting to look tired in front of his marines. All 12 of them. They hunched over crates, lying on the ground, or keeping themselves up with their guns. He keyed his radio to Will and Linda. “Status Report.” There was a short pause, but his fatigue kept him from fearing the worst.

“Linda reporting. Haven’t been spotted yet, but I’m almost out of ammo. Awaiting orders.”

“Will here. My shield generator is down, all lotus tank mines are gone, and all I’ve got is three Jackhammers each with full ammo for each, and the QQ22 is empty.”

“Understood. Both of you report to my position. Linda, grab whatever ammo you need, and pick up any more rifles you spot on the way here. Will, bring those Jackhammers and give them to any marine able to take it. The good General left quite a bit of ammo for us all, so don’t let go of a

good weapon too soon. Blue one out.”

Walking over to the final twelve, one sergeant immediately started to rise, and the rest followed suit. “At ease, marines,” Fred announced. He didn’t need them to get up on his account, and they needed the rest. They would be back in action soon enough. But at the moment, they were happy just to stay seated, a couple letting out a sigh of relief, others giving a quick grin.

Suddenly his radio blared. “Chief, this is High-comm. Station 37. You have incoming dropships, unknown amount, coming in from all vectors, as well as an unclassified vessel.”

John. “Warrant officer, we cannot take another barrage. The third wave wiped out nearly our entire platoon. If we don’t get reinforcements, we won’t be able to hold the line.” He heard static, the kind made from the shifting of headsets, meaning that someone higher ranked would deal with him.

“Chief, this is Major General Strauss. I want you and all remaining marines to get into secure positions and wait for the Prophet to come out. Once it’s out, kill it.”

“Understood.” This mission was suicide, and he knew it. The only problem would be getting the marines to go along with it. With no reinforcements, he didn’t know what to expect. He, as well as the rest of the Spartans, had never been on a mission that wasn’t considered suicide by someone. Unfortunately, he wasn’t giving the orders here, only relaying them.

“Marines, listen up! The Covenant is bringing their biggest wave yet. However, we won’t be engaging them.”

Every marine showed bewilderment, looking at each other, saying things like “Say what?!”, and “No Way!” Fred grinned, seeing they were willing to give it all for this fight. “Don’t worry marines, you’ll get your chance for some more kills. Our goal, however, is to take down a Covenant leader.”

“Hey”, one marine called, “He’s mine.

“Don’t even think about it”, another broke in. “I’m gonna make a trophy out of its head and place it on my mantle at home for the kids to see.”

“You’ll all get your chance. At the moment, everyone needs to find a secure position to hide until the Prophet hits groundside and is away from its ship. Only on my signal will anyone open fire.”

“Yes sir!”, they all yelled in unison. These men, as well as their fallen comrades, have really proven themselves, Fred thought to himself. He turned to see Linda reloading her Rifle and Will carrying the Jackhammers

and running past him.

“Linda, after Will’s done, find secure positions for all the marines.” She nodded, and turned to start her search. Turning back to the marines and Will, Fred knocked on Will’s back, letting him know he was going to make field repairs on his suit. Always the Spartan’s practice when not in combat, they managed each other’s Mjolnir armor systems constantly, knowing its importance.

“Alright marines, lets move! We don’t have all day.” Immediately following Linda, they double-timed it out of sight, knowing the next Covenant attack could come at any time. Finishing the repairs as best he could, Fred reinserted Will’s shield generator back into his armor, closed the hatch, and knocked twice.

Only moments later he heard the rhythmic hum let off by it, and saw the electric flickering of Will’s shields. Always a good sign. “Shields up at 50% and holding. Thanks, having no shields was not very fun.” He knew exactly what Will meant, running around knowing that any single shot could take him out. Although they never relied on their shields to save them, the Spartans certainly appreciated having them, and found it more and more difficult to go on missions without using them.

“Sir?” Fred turned to see the Sergeant, standing straight with his hand extended towards him. “Sir, it’s been an honor serving with you. I wanted to let you know that all of us are glad to have you on our side.”

The man’s face shone bright, and his hand was grasped by the great metal grip of the Spartan’s gauntlet. Very few ever shook hands with a Spartan, knowing that their hands could easily be broken by even the gentlest squeeze. Anyone who did, however, was always accepted by the Spartans, and this Sergeant would be no exception. “The honor is mine, Sergeant.” With that, the Sergeant nodded, turned and returned to his post. “Chief, ETA in 30 seconds. And sir... good luck. Comm. station 37 out.” Letting out a sigh, Fred grabbed his weapon and started walking towards the large building that had once been their base.

“Linda, status.”

“All marines secure and waiting, sir.”

“Good. Will, I want you to coordinate all marines with Jackhammers where and when to fire. If necessary, set them to fire at only your target and order them when to pull the trigger.” An acknowledgement signal blinked on his HUD, and Fred ran into the base, holding his back against the wall. The dropships were coming into view now, and the amount was unbelievable.

He’d never seen so many in his life. His long range sensors were

completely full with red targets, and he turned it off because it would be useless against the amount of Covenant he was about to face. “Turn off your FOF tags. Let’s make sure they can’t tell who we are unless they see us.”

With a force this big, the only possible attacks that would do any damage was guerrilla tactics. Of course, their mission was only to take out one thing, but it would be guarded heavily. He turned his external speakers to full blast to make sure all his marines hear him.

“Marines, do not open fire until the Prophet has exited its ship and I give the signal. I want all of you to take out anything that stands in front of it, and make way for Blue 2’s sniper firing. All marines with Jackhammers, do not waste your rockets. Only fire when ordered by Blue 3. From now on, we’ll be on radio silence. Once that ship’s down, open the gates of hell on them.”

The sound of several marines yelling could be heard in the distance, obviously feeling as he did about disposing their enemy. At least 30 more dropships came into view since he gave his last orders, and all forms of Covenant troops were on the ground. Looking through a crack in the wall he leaned upon, hundreds of Covenant were gathering. Scout groups were running through the areas he and the others had been in only moments ago, scurrying around bodies of both Covenant and humans alike.

Scanning the sky for the ship with the Master Chief, with John, he scoped the small triangular vessel growing at a fast rate. But he couldn’t worry about that now, he needed to focus on getting that Prophet. He restarted his radar tracking, knowing that no one in his team was coming to him, and set it to a 10 meter radius. Immediately he saw yellow dots all around the perimeter, meaning they were below the base. There was only one way into the base since he got rid of all ladders; it was a narrow passageway about 5 meters from him.

Gun pointed towards the passageway, the ground shook, which had to be the vessel landing. Closing a fist and holding it in the air, he alerted his team to wait, not knowing how long it would take to get the Prophet out or whether it was coming at all. A single red blip on his radar circled the perimeter of the base twice now, and was coming back to the open side. Fred checked his gun quickly and saw the ammo was full, but also checked the cartridge to make sure. Damn glad for these ballistic rounds. Suddenly, six more blips came into view, all coming through the open side. He pawed a grenade, but kept a steady hand on his Gritter, pointed at the head of any Elite that may walk through.

They started closing in on him. 9 meters, 7 meters. Looking through the

scope, he stayed cool and sharp, not flinching a muscle, not breaking a sweat. An orange fin popped into site, and just as the head of the short Grunt came into site, it didn't even have time to react before 3 bullets pieced its skull and erupted its entire methane-filled suit, instantly incinerating all behind it.

Looking back through the crack, three teams of Elites, Jackals, and Grunts headed towards that same opening, now littered in the burning carcasses of their comrades. They came in standard formation: Jackals wielding energy shields in front, Grunts and Elites behind. Of course, the size of the passageway would force them to change their formation, but to Fred, they were just as cooked as the previous squad.

When they were eight meters in, he tossed two grenades down the route, and enlarged the body pile. Checking the ship, a large crowd of Brutes stood in a strange formation, all huddled very close to each other, as though they were making a perimeter around...

Throwing his hands up holding his two remaining fragmentation grenades, Fred lobbed them as far as possible, both landing in that perimeter. One bounced on the floor and exploded, and the other bounced off one helmet, then another, and detonated above them. Immediately 4 rockets fired on that position, as well as 10 sniper rounds.

Jackals holding Beam Rifles appeared out of nowhere and fired off three shots. Another burst of rockets went out, and it blew several more Brutes away. More plasma charges came from the ground, and he heard loud screams from his marines in the distance.

The Brutes moved with haste, and with their great height they blocked any possible view of the Prophet. They headed straight for him, or at least the base. Standing up, he dropped his rifle, brought up two plasma grenades and aimed both, sticking two Brutes directly on their faces, decapitating them only moments later.

But the group kept up a constant pace, and even the third and fourth barrage of rockets didn't slow them. Hearing more marines screams, Fred scoped a Jackal sniping and took it out, then another, then four more. His role shifted to support; he needed those marines more than ever, but he wasn't sure if any were left.

Only 15 meters from the base now, Fred knew he had to get out of there. Any route he had, however, would mean instant death. With the amount of Covenant snipers in the area, it's a wonder that any of them were still alive. With that, he concluded the only way he could go.

Right in the middle of it.

Setting his shields to be only above his knees and his gun to single shot

bursts, he went back to the far wall, then ran towards the edge. After 3 steps he reached top speed, and he jumped at the fourth. Just before he hit the ground, he set his shields only to the soles of his feet, making him practically levitate on the ground. This kept him moving at the same speed and he wouldn't slow down until he hit something or he fell over.

Both of which would mean he was dead.

Going through the middle of the battlefield, he fired a round at another Jackal wielding a Beam Rifle, killing it before it even knew what had happened. Plasma streaked past him, all missing due to his high and constant speed. After taking out at least 17 Jackals, one directly in front of him shot his foot, kicking it up in the air.

Almost losing his balance and his gun, he twisted inhumanly to it and shot off its head, feeling the plasma scorch his skin. More shots came from behind, and on one leg, he turned again and answered to their calls.

Only then did he stop with a sudden thud, cracking the bones in his neck and back. Not even being able to turn around, a huge blue arm grasped him, cut off his breathing and kept him in place. Just as everything turned black, the strangle-hold let loose, and he fell to the ground, panting for air. He looked up to see his savior, only to see an image barely visible due to the sun behind it.

“How can I help, Blue one?”

Chapter 18

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 18

0950, Oct. 22, 2552 (Personal Time)/ New York Outskirts
North American Continent

Pulling the Spartan to his feet, he received the smile gesture, which he returned graciously. "Status?"

"Sir, the Covenant have a perimeter around their Prophet, and they just went through the underground part of that base", pointing to his recent abode.

Fred keyed his radio. "Blue two and three, meet up at the center and bring along all remaining marines."

Watching Fred look down at the monstrosity that brought him so close to death, yet again, he stared at the orange stains on the Hunter. His vitals were in normal parameters, with only an increased heart rate. Other than severe burns on his right leg and minor lacerations on both of his arms, he was in great shape.

Will and Linda ran up to the two of them, both nodding to Fred and gesturing to his savior. Fred looked behind them both, only to see Linda shaking her head, and all three took a moment of silence.

"Permission to assume command, blue one."

Fred looked back at the downed Hunter. "Permission granted, Master Chief." Fred patted him on the shoulder. "It's good to have you back, John."

"It's good to be back." He walked in front of the group, and turned back to his team. "Will, scavenge as many rockets as you can; we'll need the heavy weapons. Linda, grab whatever sniper ammo you need, and get a Beam Rifle if you need to. Fred, take a crate with the BR55 and SMG ammo, and throw in a bunch of grenades. We're going after them."

The heavy breathing of two Brutes blared through John's internal speakers as he and Will sneaked down the corridor nearby. Peeking around the corner, he stole a glance of the room, spotting seven Brutes, nine Elites, 14 Jackals, a Hunter pair, and around 20 Grunts and Drones.

He set his suit's radio to receive only F-band signals, and the voices of

hundreds of Covenant troops came through. About to speak, he stopped himself, remembering that he was on his own, and didn't have Cortana's abilities at his disposal.

Recapping the room, a discrepancy fired off warnings in his head. The room was quite large, able to hold a force at least triple the size, yet they bunched together as though the empty space pushed them away from one another. Drones covered the ceiling, flying to and fro. Jackals crowded together on one side of the room, with the opposite wall yielding to the Grunts.

But John's problem with the scene was how the Brutes and Elites stationed themselves, on the far sides of the room. The Elites were obviously uncomfortable, standing strangely and in complete silence, watching everything that happened in the room, while the Brutes simply disregarded all protocol and conversed noisily, laughing, grunting, and snorting.

The Hunter pair stood in the middle of the room. Their massive bodies seemed to protrude from the room, as though they didn't belong at all. A reckless Grunt ran into one Hunter's leg, and fell backwards. They took no notice to it, even as it scattered off.

Before getting on the Forerunner ship, the Covenant was in disarray, firing upon each other, meaning that a civil war might ensue. The forces here on Earth, however, seemed to be ignorant of what was happening, but the tension was still present.

Turning to Will, he pointed to his gun, to Will's Jackhammer, then to himself. Will handed his Jackhammer over and hoisted the QQ22 on his shoulder, just as John did with the Rocket Launcher.

Looking across the hall, John unclipped a grenade and pointed at it, then to the room. Fred grabbed one of his own and gave the thumbs up.

Holding it with his left thumb and forefinger, John held the other three fingers up as a countdown. His middle finger dropped, then index, then...

John's speakers played a deep voice, and translated them from a Brute.

Focusing on what he was about to do, the voice slipped by him, but his gut told him to stop and wait. He'd learned long ago to trust it, as all the Spartans have, and it saved all of them numerous times in battle. The reaction from one Elite caught his attention, however. Making a cutting motion with his left arm to tell his team to back down, he turned the volume up and listened in.

"What did you say," an Elite yelled across the chamber.

"See, they are hard of hearing as well," the Brute captain said to his group, who broke out into laughter. The Elite, wearing golden armor, began

approaching the center of the room, followed by the rest of his Elites. The Brutes followed their captain, and the Hunters stepped out of the way. The two leaders stood only centimeters away from each other.

The Brute turned from his group to the Elite, and snorted. "I will rip your arms from their sockets, then your head from your body."

"And I will open your chest and take your heart, while you live, and you shall watch me crush it in my hands." Both growling, John's finger fell as he flung off the grenades safety pin, checking his calculations, and threw it at the ground only meters ahead of his position.

The grenades internal countdown mechanism started as it hit the ground, immediately counting down from three. At two seconds, the noise it made against the ground registered among several Jackals and Grunts, who looked about to find the source. At one second all Covenant forces became alert of the possible danger, excluding the Brutes and Elites, their leaders still staring each other down. At .1 seconds left, the grenade blocked their view of the two captains from each other.

Its explosion propelled the groups of Elites and Brutes across the room, killing many instantly, as well as sending a rippling shockwave to all present. John flung his arm forward and rushed in, firing a rocket at the confused group of Jackals. Behind him Will had unleashed two bursts of radiation, scattering the Drones and hitting a Hunter. The sound of two rifles came from around the corridor, dropping more Drones and the other Hunter.

Grunts yelled in fear and ran, one in continual circles, until John took them out with his second rocket. Will let out another burst towards the Elites, disintegrating one that was directly hit, while the blast killed anything that stood too close to it.

John dropped his Jackhammer and pulled out his BR55 to clear any remaining targets, only to see Will fly across the room and crack a self portrait into the wall behind. Averting his eyes to Will's previous position, the sight of three beserking Brutes came into view.

Charging towards him, two tripped over themselves and stopped completely, one after the other, with the deafening sound of .50 caliber bullets leaving their chambers. Only one directly ahead of him continued its pursuit, as John clutched a plasma grenade from his belt and activated it behind his back. He dropped his gun and bent his knees, putting most of his weight on his right leg. When the Brute was just a meter away, John pushed off of his right foot and flung himself into the air, sticking the grenade onto his adversary's snout.

It gave out a shriek as John leaped for cover. The Brute grabbing at it,

perhaps willing to give its nose for its head, yet time showed no pity. As the body landed and pinkish blood fell to the floor, the Spartans regrouped. Climbing out of the wall, Will picked up his QQ22 and joined his team. Fred and Linda stared uneasily upon him, never seeing anyone take a direct hit from a Brute before, while John checked his vitals. "You alright?" Fred asked.

Will ran his hand along the fist-shaped depression in his chest, and looked to the wall. "Perfect. Just wondering which dent made more damage."

Linda chuckled and Fred pat his back. "Will, your vitals are sporadic."

John knew his Spartans wouldn't lie to him, let alone about something this important. "Suit malfunction?"

"Probably. Internal systems show normal, but the suit to suit transmitter may be damaged."

"We'll worry about that later. Let's keep-" He stopped mid-sentence, feeling the floor vibrate just before his shield fully regenerated. Holding up a fist for his team to wait, he checked the seismic activity. It tripled, and was only getting larger.

"They're coming this way," John warned. "So let's pull out the welcome mat."

Chapter 20

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 20

Staring out into the intense battle before his eyes, Admiral Hood turned to his officers, all sitting at their stations, typing away commands into their consoles. His eyes didn't hold the same light they did when he entered the battle, his optimism leaving, hope fading. "What is our status compared to the Covenant armada?"

"Sir, they outnumber us about...they have six ships for every five of ours. It's much closer than Cortana originally predicted. We may be able to tip that balance soon." Very optimistic, but unrealistic. The chances to do that fall with every ship we lose. They continue to send boarding parties to Earth and to the orbital stations as well. How we've managed to stay in orbit, I can only guess. But soon they will overpower this station, and the others, and the fleet will have no backup. With the number left now, it's only a matter of hours until they do.

The lack of sleep and old age had caught up threefold on his face, almost looking like a wrinkled dog's face. But nothing but death would shake him from the intense focus he had while looking at the tactical display, showing the entire space battle on the simple two dimensional board. He searched for a way to bring victory to his people, but with the larger number of Covenant vessels there, it simply seemed impossible. They were outgunned, outmanned, and outclassed. And even if they did win, what about the next armada? Surely the Covenant had more vessels to attack with, as they had one this size destroyed at the Unyielding Hierophant, and there must have been more. This fight might be in vain.

That thought repeated over and over in his head, when his lieutenant's voice brought him back to reality. "ONI central is requesting that you give all command over to them immediately, and they will eliminate the threat now. I don't know what they mean, but I'm not getting any more intel on it."

What are they up to? If I refuse to agree, they can't do anything, not now. But what can I do? Maybe they have a solution, but they are hiding it. Is it worth the risk? "Ok, they have full authority over the operation, clearance alpha gamma epsilon 369. But I want to be immediately told in any changes with the fight out there. Understood?"

"Yes sir. Sending message now." The Cairo fired another round, the huge ball of depleted uranium traveling at a fourth the speed of light. The

thought of it traveling so fast took his mind off the battle for a moment, a moment desperately needed now. According to Einstein's theory of relativity, the mass of the projectile increased significantly due to the huge velocity, as did the momentum, and thus, the damage. Not only that, but it appeared smaller to anyone watching it, making the target unaware of how truly powerful the blast was. A direct hit was almost a sure fire guarantee that the target was to be obliterated, or at least not leave the battle without a huge hole in it.

"Admiral, encoded messages are being sent through to all allied vessels. It says to bring all Covenant forces as close to sectors 21, 24 and 27."

"Sectors 21, 24 and 27? Nothing is in those sectors. Why would they-"

The admiral's brow scrunched closed, his eyes looking from side to side as though to find the answer. Sectors 21, 24 and 27 were placed off limits during battle preparations. That means that they put something there, waiting for the battle to turn ugly, and ONI would come in and save the day. But the only thing that could work would be..."-Order all ships to avoid those areas immediately! There are nuclear weapons there, and all those ships will be damaged or disabled!"

"Sir, we're being jammed! No communications can be sent."

"What? From where?"

"Scanning...sir, it's coming from within the Cairo."

A look of anger warped the admiral's face, as he walked with heavy-set fists through the control panel. The line-up of officers continued to work, typing away strenuously to solve whatever problems they were dealing with. All but one.

Picking up his pace, Hood came to the man's console, seeing a dark screen. The officer sat cross armed, obviously waiting for the Admiral to find him. "I order you to get rid of that jammer immediately!"

"I'm afraid he can't do that admiral", a voice spoke through the speakers on the control. The familiarity and coolness of it alarmed Hood, and only a single thought came through his head, as his teeth gritted and the other officers stared and watched. His face appeared on the screen as it lit up, a smile across his face sent a chill down Hood's spine. That smile was frightening, constant through every word, never wavering, as though to seem pleasant. But there was more to that look, something hidden, something making this man in complete control of the situation

"Colonel James Ackerson."

"I'm glad I haven't been forgotten, even that's what I'm sure you've really wanted for quite some time now. Isn't that correct?" His voice stayed calm and steady, never wavering from its coolness. It heated up the

admiral, unable to keep calm himself with complete control, but safe for the time being.

“Ackerson, you will not get my fleet destroyed. Not on my watch.”

“I’m sorry admiral, but my hands are tied. You gave over all your command functions over to me just a minute ago. And I’m simply working for the best interest of human society. I would suggest that you and your crew leave that station while you still have a chance. It will be difficult without any systems functioning.”

“When I get my hands on you, I’ll-”

“Don’t worry, you won’t. Chances are that I’ll be considered a huge war hero from my bravery while you are forgotten, honorably discharged, and moved to some remote estate where nobody will ever find you. You should be thanking me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a war to win.”

“Ackerson!” But it was too late, the screen died, killing the image of Ackerson’s stupid grin from the space station, possibly for the last time. A headache brewed within the admiral’s head as he ran into overdrive, thinking of anything that would solve this problem. Anything that could help in any way, but nothing came to him. As though a brick wall had been placed in front of his thoughts, it allowed him no insight to save his fleet, and threatened to tumble onto him. “I want a way to contact the fleet, and I want it now! If we don’t warn them, most of the fleet will be gone, and the rest of it will be immobile from the EMP blast, including this station.”

But it was no use. The tactical display showed the fleet doing just as they were ordered, collecting a large portion of themselves and the Covenant vessels into those sectors. They were almost full, those sectors crawling with more ships per square kilometer than he’d ever seen before. That’s when it struck.

A huge blast ripped through those vessels, tearing through Covenant and Human alike. It blew away every atom of their hulls like dust in the wind, disintegrating every trace of metal and flesh. Only the large explosion was visible, and only for a moment before anyone looking could not watch any longer, for the intensity of the blast was brighter than the sun. The admiral covered his eyes with his arm, yet still tried to watch. The futile attempt only led to a momentary blindness and disorientation, and the universe disappeared for a moment.

Then the shockwave came at the Cairo, shaking it violently, and all electronic devices died without a trace, no way to repair it so quickly. This meant every single system aboard the Cairo was gone, including life support and possibly the backup generators, which may have been on due

to the damage received. "Do we have any power left?"

"I'm not sure sir. And even if there was, turning on the equipment might spend it."

"Fine, I'm ordering the evacuation of this station. We're sitting ducks up here without any power, and it'll take a week and an entire crew to fix her, and we don't have that kind of time. Everyone get to the evacuation pods, and if you find any other personnel, inform them to do the same. There's not much we can do now."

He looked back where the three explosions took place, and something reflected from it into the corner of his eye. Squinting as best he could, the Admiral made out his worst nightmare: Covenant battle cruisers, still intact and now moving out of that sector. Oh hell, without any more ships to defend, they've got a straight shot at Earth! The ships grew larger, and his eyes widened when he saw why. "Covenant ships on attack vector, heading straight for us! Get the hell out of here now!"

The bridge filled with panic, all officers now crazed in search of some way to sustain themselves. But Lord Hood had no time to ponder this, as he himself was caught in the frenzy, running towards the closest known escape pod sector available. The pearl white halls and small and seemingly insignificant call sign's of each hall- and walkway flew past his old eyes as another streak of color among the vast reach of pure white, seen in all directions. Each escape pod in the immediate area had already been launched or destroyed, and the admiral ran towards the next section, his heart pounding like never before.

Stopping was the only thought in mind, yet he could not and did not. Each second wasted was another second for the Covenant to rid of more Humans, he thought. More Humans that would fight back take a life or more, never give in. Yet his heart pounded his chest as though ready to escape, and run itself to the escape pod instead of its host body. The thought almost brought a smile to his face, but no effort was made in the direction of humor, only of life, and sustaining it.

Section after section of escape pod areas had already been used up, and yet he was still aboard, and no idea of the next section clouded his mind. Frantically looking towards his last location and the still unexplored regions of the huge station, a moaning caught his attention, pulling him to it. Several marines lay under heavy debris, one of them making the sound while more lay unconscious or dead. "Are you alright? Let me get this off of you." Pulling with all the strength he had, Hood found that he lacked it, and turned to find some tool to help maneuver around this obstacle. A large metal pole, apparently from the broken pillar only a few meters away,

lay quietly and content with the universe, but the Admiral felt otherwise. Using the pole as a lever, Hood heaved the large block off of the moaning marine, a low ranked private, but he only saw the life still within the person. This was no time for prejudice; not on any level. He'd save that for another day, maybe another person. The private looked up at him, then tried to get up, but failed and fell back to the cold hard ground. Grabbing his arm and slinging it over his shoulder, the Admiral stood and began walking in a direction, anything away from where he'd been and hopefully towards salvation.

"Escape shuttles...three blocks...left...code 841." Hood stopped for a single moment, thinking to tell the badly hurt marine to stay quiet, to conserve her energy, and to keep living. But he thought better, knowing that anything she would say would not be in vain. There were already too many situations he'd seen where the final words, or possible final words, were shut out to 'help' the person, yet it was a waste. In this case, it had saved his life. Taking no time to congratulate his own philosophy, Hood walked as quickly as possible to the place ordained by the marine, graciously thanking God that she was light, or at least lighter than he'd expected.

Several escape pods were released from their stations by faster officers ahead of him, all too involved with their own problems to help him with his own. He decided against blaming them, as their youth prevented them from such thoughts, and a lack of training and thought allowed for the such. Coming up on the deck, he looked through the blast doors of each escape pod, only seeing the remains of them floating outside or the empty space of the departed. The third one in the row was still there, and he punched in the code, which, thankfully enough still worked.

It seemed that Ackerson wasn't as coldhearted as he presumed: he shut down the escape pod's subsystems before the nukes went off to make sure they'd be able to escape. The thoughtfulness didn't appeal to the Admiral, who quickly opened the blast doors and went inside, laying the marine on the closest seat and sitting in the pilot's chair. The console was foreign, but after scrutinizing it briefly, he made clear to the onboard systems that departure was necessary, and it took off, leaving the station.

The destination to be set was both a trivial and vital matter to attend to, and he simply set the navigation to autopilot the pod until it would reach Earth's atmosphere to land at New Mombasa, where the Cairo was stationed over, and where the first Covenant strike force attacked. He reminded himself that it was all but destroyed, and looked for the next best landing spot, confirming it into the computer's database.

Turning the swivel chair around, Lord Hood went over to the marine, who breathed heavily, yet seemed to be conscious. "Where are you hurt?" She placed her left hand over her ribs, probably meaning a few were broken, to say the least. Internal bleeding was a possibility, but there were no medical supplies available, as they'd been stripped bare for other equipment, which was still not onboard. "Try to stay still. When we land, I'll get you to the finest hospital around, and you'll be back killing those Covenant bastards before you can argue with me about it."

Barely opening her eyes, she let out a brief smile, and then her head leaned to the left sharply, falling on her shoulder. Checking her pulse proved she was still alive, only exhausted and asleep from the excessive strain on her body. The station, visible through the screen on the pilot's HUD through the aft cameras showed the giant station quietly drifting through space, and then erupting with a pulse of purple light, yet it refused to fade. The light stayed until the station was nothing more than floating rubble, with only a view of the massive Covenant vessels closing in on Earth.

At that point, the same ship that destroyed the Cairo jostled violently, as though hit by a mallet its own size. It continued to do so until it simply exploded, yet with the dark of space in the background, no sense could be made of the situation. "Computer, identify vessel that destroyed the Covenant cruiser in sector 42."

"Scanning...unknown classification, unknown alliance. No information available." What the hell? He continued to watch the screen, hoping to get a glimpse of whatever was now fighting the Covenant, to see what could possibly be helping the UNSC fleet in its most dire moment. But the autopilot prevented it, and began its descent into the Earth's atmosphere. Damn, I wish I knew what that was. Sitting back in the command seat, he typed on the console as fast as he could; prepping the escape pod for emergency landing into an atmospheric environment was no easy task.

Staring down at the private refueling his ship, Helstrum couldn't help but wonder what the hell was going on out there. He's been inside the Cairo for only 20 minutes, and yet every second out of battle, or at least space, was a lost moment. There were so many personnel running back and forth in a frenzy that he could only guess the situation was bad, if not terrible. But the Cairo was still operational, and for the moment, that's all that really mattered.

"Hey commander, I'm prep'd up and ready!" Jan yelled from across the large yet empty fighter bay. The sound traveled very well without the normal resistance of hundreds of voices and at least 10 other fighters in the

bay. It surprised them both.

“Ok, get out there, but don’t stray too far from the barn. We’ll be done before you can say supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.” He almost laughed when the acoustics in the room allowed him to hear her whispering it, trying to get the phrase right. My favorite practical joke, and yet nobody’s been able to use it against me yet. Looking back down at the private, he hollered, “when’s this puppy gonna be up and running?”

“Just give it another five, sir. The ordinance will be here before then.” The given conditions led to an awkward silence, a period where nobody knew what to say, yet the void of sound seemed to require a voice, some savior from it. But it remained, momentarily disrupted by the engines and take-off from Jan’s ship, then came again, this time seeming worse than before.

Twiddling his fingers wasn’t cutting it.

“So...heard anything from the front?”

“Nope, not yet.”

“Got any friends fighting out there?”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

The guy apparently didn’t want to talk, just wanted to do his job and get it over with. “How’s your mother doing?”

“Sir, I’d appreciate it if you let me do my job.” Helstrum didn’t press the issue. Maybe his mother’s dead. That would kill the conversation better than any nuke I’ve used today.

The ordinance rolled in on a huge rolling cart, pushed by two more marines, both without any rank or insignia. At this point, he didn’t care to let them know, as they weren’t exactly in the best position to be taking his crap. Especially since they were the ones holding every bullet and nuke he’d take back to the battle with him.

One of the marines tripped and the entire stock of munitions began to tip over, with the nukes on top. One started to slip off, but the fallen marine managed to grab his post and bring it back to normal before anything could fall. “Hey, be careful with that! If your not, this whole station’s gonna be very empty, very fast.”

“Ye-yes sir!” Quickly fixing the problem, they hurried to load the weapons into his Ulysses, and he simply began tapping on the hull of it. Tapping louder and louder, he could see the marine refueling it was becoming annoyed, yet also would not comment on the incident. This gave Helstrum a small joy, although he realized only shortly after that he was becoming annoyed to, and stopped.

“Yo, commander, when you gonna get done!” yelled Sach from his own fighter craft across the bay.

“Any minute now...” staring down at the marines, who gave back a look, telling him that they heard and were working on it. “If you’re ready, get out there and take some down for me!”

“I dunno, I got a bad feeling about this. Something doesn’t feel right. You know what I mean?”

“No, I don’t know what you mean. Now get your ass back out there and make me proud!”

“Aww, c’mon sir, I’ll just wait for you to finish.”

Helstrum raised his index finger, like that of a father punishing his son.

“Boy, don’t give me none of your lip!” Just as he finished yelling, the lights suddenly flickered off, and the fuel stopped pumping. The entire bay was completely black and now quiet too. Helstrum reached in his cockpit and pulled out a flashlight, shining it at his refit team.

“What the hell! How did the lights go out? Doesn’t this station have backup generators?”

“Yes sir, it does. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“I’m guessing the fuel pump is dead. Ok, take my flashlight and finish getting that ammo in there. I’m not leaving here until I have those, and I’m leaving in two minutes. Sach, warm up your bird and get on the comm. Find out what’s goin on.”

Everyone rushed to their work, and Helstrum did something he thought his wife promised him not to do: think. It always got him in trouble with her, and she simply wanted to solve that problem. What could knock out all of the systems aboard this station so easily, yet keep it perfectly intact? Well, an EMP blast could do that, but I don’t see how that could have happened. And if it did, only things on would be affected, so chances are that the comm. won’t work.

“Sir, the comm.’s not working. All I’m getting is static.” Figures. That’s why she never wanted me to think. I was always right.

“Ok, we probably got hit by an EMP blast, but I don’t have any clue how that may have happened. When you guys finish up with my bird, hit the escape pods. They’ll work. And keep the flashlight.”

“Sir, we’re all prep’d up. But the blast doors are closed. You’ll have to break through them, or you won’t be able to leave.”

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll figure it out. Just get to those escape pods.”

The five marines on the ground stood straight and saluted Helstrum, and he returned it graciously. They ran off and he started his Ulysses, giving it a full systems check. “Computer, are there any malfunctions or possible system errors preventing full power?”

“Negative. Vessel fully operational.” Good. Whatever blew out the lights

left us intact.

Putting on his headset, Helstrum flicked a switch to activate it on his team's designated frequency. "Hey kid, you ready to get outta here?"

"Sure thing boss. But what about Jan? The blast probably wiped out her systems as well."

Damnit! "We can't leave her behind. These fighters all have a distress beacon that activates when any system failures occur. I'll go and pick her up while you use the grapple to hold her ship in place. Then...we'll figure out the rest from there. Now take off and follow my lead."

Scrambling off the ground and grabbing the stick, Helstrum veered his ship up and to the left, towards the fighter launch bay. Flying too fast and barely missing the walls, he switched on the ship's lights, only to find the blast doors a couple hundred meters in front of him. He pulled the trigger and let loose a barrage of missiles, and increased his speed. They flew in front of him and exploded on impact, making smoke appear then disappear into the blackness of space, along with his ship.

Reaching the vacuum, his radar showed one red light, blinking in and out of existence. He increased his speed and Sach followed, not falling a step behind. Jan's ship came into view, Sach flew ahead and connected his grapple to her ship from the top while Helstrum flew underneath and initiated a connection of the two vessels. The computer's robotic voice came through his headset. "Connection in three, two, one, ships connected. Transfer of personnel and equipment will be possible momentarily. Please stand by."

He waited for a moment, then a green light blinked on his HUD, and the top of the cockpit opened hard before he could even reach for it. Her head peered through. "Took you long enough, sir. With all due respect."

"Of course. Now get in the co-pilot seat and set all the warheads to detonate on impact. We'll have Sach steer your best friend into the biggest Covenant ship we can find, and get it within their shields. That way, we won't waste any good firepower we have."

"Umm, sir, without being able to steer that thing, we won't have the time or ability to bring it inside any capital ship and have enough time to get out. Maybe we should leave it for later?"

"Yes, that sounds like a plan. Sach, you hear all that?"

"Yes sir, dropping off this baby now. I'm reading an energy spike in that Covenant ship at 243 by 184. Their firing at the Cairo!"

"Damn! Full engines! Let's beat them to the punch!"

"Norman," Jan said, covering her mike, "we won't have time. If their firing now, the Cairo's a goner. There's no need to give away our

positions or jeopardize our mission by flying in blind.”

I hate it when that woman’s right. Damn, too many lives lost already. Now this... “Alright, let’s take it nice and slow. We’ll leave the ship here and come back for it when we’re out of ammo. In the meantime, let’s get over to the battle. Jan, what’s the situation with the fleet?”

“Scanning...sir, I think there’s a malfunction with your systems. I read no operational UNSC stations or ships at all. Just us and Sach.”

“Wait, you can see Sach on your scan?”

“Yeah, it’s weird. I don’t get what’s wrong with this thing. Maybe it’s cause we’re so close to him.”

“No, its worse than that. The EMP blast that shut off all your systems must have reached the entire fleet as well. That means that there could be hundreds, maybe even thousands of people stranded out here in space, just waiting to be zapped by those Covie bastards.”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Sir, look at nine ‘o clock, right at the Earth’s edge. Do you see it?”

Squinting as hard as he good, the Commander looked at the Earth, seeing the faint blue sky from his angle, and seeing a strange object, quite large if he could see it from this distance, coming out from behind the Earth. “Sir, it’s showing as a UNSC ship. But we have no records of it anywhere.”

“Well I’ll be damned. I don’t care if I can’t see it, or even if I don’t know how big it is or what it looks like; as long as there are Humans in there, we’re in business. Let’s move out! We don’t want to keep our prey waiting.”

Chapter 21

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 21

“Chief, radar’s showing at least 50 targets coming this way. We won’t be able to take them all on. Not like this.”

“Understood. Form up on me.” The Master Chief turned and ran for the exit, going up several flights of stairs that were still a part of the abandoned base, of which the Covenant had suddenly bombarded with a huge force, consisting mainly of Brutes and Jackals. It seemed almost too perfect, being that even with superior firepower and strength, the Covenant did not attack, except for the Jackal’s who did not rush into the base. And even then, few of the species in the Covenant were even in the area when the Forerunner ship arrived, proving that there were ulterior motives behind this ‘visit’.

Reaching the last room when sunlight could actually reach, John stopped and turned back to Will. “Set up all the Lotus Tank Mines in this room and set them for proximity alert. I want this building to collapse right on top of them. Linda, Fred and I will cover your back. I’m sure they were expecting some resistance, and that there’s a surprise ready for us.”

“Right away.” Pulling his pack off and opening it revealed four of the explosives. Though small, their ability to cause destruction was truly hidden by their size. “Chief, I don’t know if this’ll blow the building. With only four, the stability will be compromised, but it could hold.”

“What about if we left a bunch of grenades here as well, and they’d explode along with the mines”, asked Linda.

“No, the grenades don’t have the power to add much to it. And we definitely don’t have enough grenades to do the trick.”

“Will, what about that new weapon of yours? You called it a-”

“QQ22? It might work, but I wouldn’t be able to fire it inside, so the only way to do so would be from out there. But finding the point of structural weakness won’t be easy. If I don’t hit that, it won’t fall. Using the Jackhammer might help as well, but it won’t matter unless we find the spot the mines make.”

“That’s better than nothing. Set it up as fast as possible, and then get out here. We’ll position ourselves away from the blast radius and hidden in case anything goes wrong.”

Running out of the building, he briefly scanned the area, looking for any possible threats. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, and they proceeded

to find a secure position. Then a familiar noise came through, something no human ever wanted to hear: the buzzing sounds of a fly, although one too large to be of this world. Green plasma rained down on their position, each Spartan scattering to different directions. At least 20 were in the air above them, but there was no chance to find out.

Several sniper rounds dropped the Drones, while another assault rifle unloaded bursts into others. John had just pulled out his BR55 and downed several himself, but more fired at him, draining his shields. He dodged several smaller plasma bursts, but a larger burst came at him and followed each movement he made. Seeing no way to stop the inevitable, he threw a grenade down 10 feet in front of him just before the burst struck. When it did, his shields flickered and died, and the grenade exploded, throwing dust and sand into the air. With the opportunity, he ran into the cloud and set his vision to infrared, and continued firing at each passing Drone.

As more rounds connected to their targets, the three Spartans soon found themselves without any more targets. Will had just run out of the building and headed towards the rest, while they ran to find cover. "How long until they reach the top?" John asked through an open comm. channel.

"Unknown. I didn't have time to check how deep they were, but if my motion detector could read them, then they're pretty close."

"Fred, take Will's Jackhammer and aim it wherever you can find an opening. Linda, if anything comes out the front; make sure they don't get to that ship. Fred, hand me that fancy gun of yours." After the exchange of weapons, the entire building seemed to shake as the mines exploded, but the building stayed intact. Fred and Will let loose as best they could, firing rockets at the building, while both John and Linda held their breath for just a moment.

When the building collapsed, John exhaled, but didn't show it. He kept his gun pointed up, ready for any surprises, and his team followed suit.

"Standby to confirm kill." The building continued to collapse for a few seconds longer, falling on top of everything that was under it, hopefully eliminating whatever threat was there. That was too easy. It shouldn't have been, especially if that was the Prophet I was told of. "Are you sure a Prophet was in the center of that large group of Brutes?"

"110% sure. Why?"

"Just be ready. There must be more to this than meets the-" The building had finished falling, but stayed standing, in a sort of way. Rubble was piling and falling off of a concentrated area, but it was unnatural, especially for the explosion that had taken place. Something was supporting the

Covenant from within the structure, but what?

The heap of rubble started to move, some most falling off while some stayed on, although what was seen then could hardly be believed by any Spartan. The Brutes continued to move, with some sort of field encircling them, shielding them from whatever may come their way. They ran together back towards the Forerunner ship, and all the Spartans raised their weapons. "No! Whatever that thing is, it's strong enough to keep a collapsing building off of it, and it sure as hell isn't going down by our guns." He quickly opened a channel to whoever could hear him, hopefully someone who would care enough about getting that Prophet. John knew that the chances were slim to get through to anyone, and that he had a better chance of talking to a wall, but he had to try.

"This is Spartan -117. The unidentified Covenant vessel carrying their leader cannot be allowed to escape under any circumstances. Fire at will if possible. I repeat, that vessel cannot be allowed to jump out of system!"

"Ulysses fighters, numbers 2930487 and 2930857, you are ordered to stand down. We'll take care of everything from here. Return home immediately, you are relieved."

What the hell? Who do they think they are? I'm the one who's been out here for God knows how long with my ass on the line! "I don't want to disappoint you, but there's no way in heaven or hell that I'm giving up this fight! We're wearing the same uniform; the same blood runs through us both! So why the hell shouldn't I be out here fighting for my friggin' race?!"

For a moment, the channel was dead quiet, and Helstrum didn't really care what the standing opinion of the new UNSC fleet said about it; he was staying out there. He wanted to keep fighting, and he was also damn curious about the new fleet. It was just like some secret government organization to hide something like this, and only use it when absolutely necessary. It was incredibly stupid, but what could he do?

"Fine, your given clearance to continue. But everything you see is to be considered classified information, or you may be court marshaled."

"Wow, it's just like you to say something born from pure genius like that. Why don't you let me know about the court martial if any of us make it out of here alive? And if we do, then we can discuss that minor detail. Helstrum out. Wow, they sure are stupid."

"You said it boss. Let's get a good look at it before we get back to owning those Covie bastards."

"I'm with you on that one. Full speed!" The Earth seemed to move

instead of them, turning faster than its norm, and the large vessel protruding from it became somewhat discernable. Helstrum could only imagine starships from old science fiction vid's, made before space travel was considerable and movies of giant space battles with other races and possibly other Humans allowed for such gigantic destroyers to be built. He almost expected to see some triangular-shaped or a very rounded ship to appear out of the Earth's shadow, and that it would be a bright white, like they always were. If that would have satisfied him, then only disappointment would follow.

The ship was almost invisible, painted so black that the only way to see it was by looking for the absence of stars. His Ulysses' HUD displayed it on his tactical display, and gave an estimate description of the ship. Around two kilometers long, batteries at every hundred meters, five Mac cannons, fifty different missile tubes, and a compliment of fighters that would normally supply ten normal UNSC destroyers. And lastly, a Super Mac Cannon lay in the middle of the vessel, shooting the huge ball of Uranium as well as the stationary Super Mac Cannons, like the Cairo.

Ship schematics showed a three dimensional description of the new vessel, giving it a strange and quite unique look. Wings protruded from many directions, all of which held some weapons or fighter bays. The hull itself seemed too thick to penetrate by conventional means, although that didn't say much against the Covenant, as they fought by unconventional means according to the UNSC.

There were also other weapons that the schematics showed, yet they were all unidentified. "Hey Jan, have you ever seen one of those before?"

"Nope, not anything like that." She scrutinized the picture, and saw something familiar to her. "It kind of reminds me of those Covie plasma rifles, but only in their look. You don't think they could have made a larger version of those, do you?"

"Nah, it's too soon. It'll take at least another 5 years to come up with that tech." Then the massive ship, which Helstrum christened the Agamemnon, opened fire on the nearest Covenant battle Cruiser. A spread of Mac rounds ate through its hull, seeing that the shields of all Covenant forces are nonoperational after the EMP burst. The battle cruiser was no more in only a matter of seconds, as the four holes in the hull made the ship tear itself inside out.

The rest of the Covenant forces were still disoriented from the blast, many of their ships destroyed and the surviving ones in critical condition, or at least without shields. And any fighter craft they had that were not within their hulls were vaporized instantly, too small to be able to withstand such

a blast. This left a clear run to all their capital ships, giving Helstrum the opportunity he needed. And then reality kicked in.

“Norman, we won’t be able to follow our normal routine. As long as the Covenant’s shields are down, we can’t use the nukes. Not without getting hit by the EMP blast ourselves, as well as that goliath of a ship.” Dammit, why didn’t I think of that?

“Ok, then we need a new plan. Set scanners to pick up any fluctuations in the shielding of any Covenant ship. If any one of them gets those shields back, we’ll put them down. In the meantime, we’re on fighter patrol. Form up on me.” By the time those words left his mouth, the Agamemnon let loose its main cannon, firing a lob of Uranium through the nose of a Covenant capital ship, and right out the end. It became two completely destroyed ships, both floating away from each other in a burning rage unseen in the battle until now.

Fighters seemed to sneeze out of the Covenant vessels, flying out in full force, ready to spread infection and death. Helstrum set his Ulysses to fly directly towards a fighter bay. Hell, if he couldn’t fire the damn nuke, didn’t mean he couldn’t go inside the mother and take out the fighters before they could get off the ground. “Sach, cover my back. I’m going in. Want to catch ‘em sleeping.”

“Gotcha.” He hit the afterburners and raced towards the nearest target, making a hard turn right into the fighter hatch. Thankfully, no fighters had reached it yet, which either meant that they were on their way, or all of them had already left. In either case, he would be sure to get in and out as fast as possible. Being stuck in this tub won’t be much fun if it blows up around me.

“Jan, send a message to our new fleet command. Tell them not to target the ship we’re in.”

“Already tried, but they didn’t seem to listen. Their on a direct course for it, and don’t seem to be stopping.”

“What the hell. Don’t those beaucroatic sons of bitches ever learn? How much time until their in range to make us go to a happier place?”

“Just a few minutes, three at max.”

“Then we’re just gonna have to work fast. Give me full power to engines. Sach, stay back here and make sure none of them get out. If you see those government guys getting ready to fire, get the hell outta here, and make sure you record the mother. I don’t want to be dead meat from my own kind without seeing them fall to the pits of hell soon after.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m sure they won’t open fire. But I’ve got it covered.” With those final words, the engines rushed the ship forward and both pilots far

back, making their seats a fraction of the size they once were. Still no Covie fighters came out, and Helstrum was getting worried. No targets meant that he was endangering himself and Jan for no reason, and he didn't take kindly to stupid decisions done by the people who always did what was 'best' for him. Normally, he liked having the geniuses at places like ONI just stay put there, but now...

Coming up to the bay, the luminescent purple light filled the interior of his eyes, the strange purple that both soothed, and brought back so many bad memories. Too many dead, from this soft and yet deadly color. The bay was filled to capacity, with Brutes and Elites climbing into their fighter craft. This was the best chance he had.

"Jan, find me the best targeting solution to take out all of these fighters as fast as possible without having to slow down and without any of them getting out." He heard her grumble something, but let it slide, knowing that what he asked for was crazy. An AI would have trouble with that task, at least for a second or two. So he pulled the trigger on the nearest one, and took out every third ship he could. Thankfully and regrettably, the bay was huge, meaning it would be impossible for him to get hit, but that there were so many targets to take out that it could take a while. And he wasn't even sure if he had the ammo to take out all these targets. Damn.

Decisions, decisions, decisions.

"Don't worry boss, I don't think you have to worry about that anymore. This baby's shields just went up. From my calculations, we can unload Fat Man here and take out everything without any worries."

Helstrum, shocked and yet so thankful, turned around in his seat, which prohibited such actions physically, and plainly said, "Jan, has anyone ever told you you're beautiful?"

"Yes, ever day. By the way, I'm also humble. Now let's blow this joint!"

"You got it. Arming Warhead...Fire!" The nuke cleared one of his six specialized pods, made just for that mission, and dropped onto the dark ground of the to-be-buried-in-space ship. "Tell those pansies we've got this one covered, and that if they know what's good for them, they'll go bother someone else." Clearing the bay and going down the hatch again, the automatic timer counted down from twenty. At ten, they reached normal space. At five, they reached the shields and blasted their way through. At one, both fighters were at least two clicks away, and the blast radius died, giving only a ripple through space. A moment of cheering ensued, as not much of a threat was present, and they set forth for new targets.

"Wait, Slipspace ruptures. Showing on screen." The computer layout

provided an image of an entire sector, where large patches of white light opened up, and gave way to the only thing that could ruin any human's day: more Covenant vessels. "I count twenty of them, all at perfect status and charging their weapons. Damn, what now?"

Yeah, now what? Even if that crazy new ship we have is super powerful, it can't take on another entire fleet. Even with the fighter support, it's outnumbered in guns at least five to one, if not more. And without the support of other UNSC ships, there would be little chance of us getting through their defenses and planting the nukes. So what do we do?

"I'm reading another Slipspace rupture. This ones opening...right in front of the Agamemnon. Hell, it's from it! Their leaving the battle!"

"What?!" But it was true, that bastard ship left the system without even saying goodbye. Without any final words or thoughts, only with itself and the dishonor that could be given to it, the most advanced Human vessel in all of history ran frightened from battle. "I am really having trouble believing this shit! Ok, here's the plan! We go in and blow every ship we can. If someone gets a wing clipped, get back to Jan's fighter and tow wait for it there. As soon as the other one of us gets the same, we'll both set the nuke's timers for three minutes and fire everything we got everywhere, including Jan's. Is that clear?!"

"But sir, that's suicide."

"I didn't ask for you're bitching. I asked you if that was clear!"

He could feel both Jan and Sach gulping loudly, the ball in their throat's clenching the back of their necks and refusing to let go. But both were good soldiers; damn fine marines. They wouldn't back down.

"Sir yes sir! Crystal clear sir!" They said in unison.

"Now that's what I'm talking about! Now let's get this show-"

"Sir, one of the Covenant ships just fired on its own. It completely obliterated it."

This day is just full of surprises. "Ok, then we wait here. Open all channels to receive anything from the F-band frequencies. Maybe we've got something going for ourselves here."

"We've got an incoming transmission, audio only. It's from Lord Hood!"

"Don't just sit there. Put him through. Admiral, glad to see you've made it out in one piece."

"I can't say the same for you. What's the status up there?"

"Covenant ships are firing on each other. As far as I know, we're the only UNSC ships still operational, although there are definitely survivors from the EMP blast. I've opened all frequencies the Covenant use to see if they are either loosing their minds or maybe coming around to working up and

agreement, being that their not happy with themselves over something.”

“Good thinking. I’ll keep on this link in case anything happens.”

“Sir, we have another incoming transmission. It’s from one of the Covenant ships.” Jan gave a worried look, not knowing what to take of this, and thankful that there was someone higher up ready to take the call.”

“Patch it through directly to me, Helstrum.”

“Understood. Stand by.”

A feed came through, showing an Elite, wearing a highly polished silver armor. The screen only showed his face and shoulders, giving it a perfect high school yearbook picture. “It is time for the light and darkness to realize its true nature, and become one with the source. Time will not allow us much measure, so prepare. A revolution awaits us all.”

Chapter 22

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 22

“Jan, what the hell is that supposed to mean?” He turned around, and stared at the blank face of his co-pilot. She just shrugged, and opened her mouth to answer, but let it sit open for a moment. Didn’t really have anything to say.

Fleet Admiral Hood’s voice came through again, as the line was still connected. “Helstrum, is this a two way connection, or are we only receiving?”

“Right now, only receiving. I can try to open a channel to them as well, if you like.”

“Do it. I have a good feeling about this, and it will be the first one I’ve had all day.” Obliging the good Admiral, Norman flipped a few switches and commenced the communiqué system, as it sent a signal towards the vessel that had just messaged him. Normally, such an action would be considered a waste of time, as it has been done only twice before, at the first and second contact. There were no records of the first contact, because the colony on Harvest was completely destroyed, and the second contact was only a small military expedition to find out what happened there, with only a few ships returning. They tried to communicate with the Covenant, but nothing happened. They were simply ignored.

“Channel open sir. Whatever you say, they’ll hear you. If you want to hold out for a second, just send the following signal here,” giving off a long and tedious alpha-numeric code, which didn’t mean anything to anyone but him. Funny, he thought, I’d always imagined using this for something else.

What am I supposed to say? Lord Hood started pacing, knowing that the fate of the planet could rest on his shoulders, or could have no meaning whatsoever. Regardless of which it was, he still felt the weight piling up. Stress built up fast, but no solutions came to mind. No one else with any command rank was around, although he knew that they were still on Earth. But there was no time to contact them and discuss the matter. The Covenant were not known to be patient, or at least for him. He looked out the window, and stared into the deep blue sky. The ground was a battered battlefield, and not a pretty sight. And before the nukes went off, neither was the sky. But now it was the only peaceful thing

around. Even the room he paced in was trashed, electronics lying around and rubble everywhere. The sky was the only place he could turn his eyes towards, the only thing that could lift the burden from his chest, even for a moment. That's where he found inspiration.

"Covenant fleet, this is Vice Admiral Hood of the UNSC. If I humbly understood what you have sent us, then I accept a truce and would like to discuss the matter personally." Holding his breath, he wondered what kind of inspiration had actually hit him. Nothing he said was outstanding in any way, just simple. He could have begged to meet them, kindly said no, or told them to burn in hell. But nothing he could have said would have helped very much.

"Agreed. In three of your standard hours, meet us at our closest vessel to your Earth. Do not be late. Instructions will be given when you arrive. But be warned. Many of our brothers will still fight you. If they do not engage you, then they are not to be fired upon. If they do, then they are treasonous, and deserve their fate." The picture of the Elite flickered off, and a smile blew across the Admiral's face.

"I'd say that went well, sir."

"And I'd agree. But to stay on the safe side, I want you up there. If anything goes wrong, I want them out of our sky. Understood?"

"Yes sir. If I may ask, how are you going to get up here? As far as I know, the fighting down there is still pretty intense, meaning it might be hard to get a lift. If one of us came down and picked you up, we could make it back in time."

"No, I can't take that risk. And it might take too long. Anyways, being high up in the brass does have its advantages. Admiral Hood out." Turning back towards the officers working at their stations, he almost forgot he was back on Earth, being so used to the Cairo. Reality hit him hard when he almost called for his old staff member in the same position as the marine he watched, and then shook his head, slightly dazed.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"No, I don't think I'll ever be all right again. I need a stim pack and some serious coffee. But first, how's Arlene?"

"You mean the one you brought with you? I'll check with the hospital right away." Lord Hood started pacing again, something his feet had never been able to grow tired of, and something for him to do while waiting for news which he probably didn't want to hear. Being pleasantly surprised once, Hood tried his luck a second time. "She's still in critical condition, but they've stabilized her. The doctors say she'll make a full recovery." Hood gave a sigh of relief, and gave another look towards the sky,

thanking whoever was responsible. Now there was only the matter of finding a ship to take him, as well as figuring out what the status down here was. Truthfully, his only clue was the scorched Earth around him, which didn't exactly give the most welcome thoughts on their success. "This is Spartan -117. The unidentified Covenant vessel carrying their leader cannot be allowed to escape under any circumstances. I repeat, that vessel cannot be allowed to jump out of system!" The message blared through every speaker in the room, causing several officers to cover their ears instinctively. Hood simply grimaced at the volume. When it repeated a second time, he saw that the Master Chief had made it an automated message to continue playing until someone responded to it.

"Cut it!" he yelled as loud as possible. The speakers died mid sentence, giving the room a quiet feel to it, as though it were devoid of any sound.

"Can you find that signal?"

"One moment...we have his position, as well as the other Spartans. The unregistered ship is also leaving orbit. Orders?"

"Do we have any means to take out that vessel?"

"No sir, not without the fleet."

"Then we'll let it go. Not like we have much of a choice in the matter. Show me the sectors where we have the most fighting on the tactical display." Walking over to the blue graph-like monitor, a two dimensional map of the world appeared, with stars for each city under attack. The larger the star, the bigger the attacking force. Most of the stars were evenly sized, but one stuck out like a sore thumb, at least three times the size of any other. "Why is this one so much larger than the rest?"

"Sir, there's a Covenant capital ship orbiting the city. It arrived there only a half hour ago, and has been sending a barrage of troops to attack, as well as every artillery unit we've ever come across, and some we haven't."

How did this one get through? It probably got past that other ship and attacked head on, knowing we'd have nothing to stop it. Time to pull out the ace.

"Get the closest pelican to the Master Chief, and send him over there. I want that ship out of my sky. Then open a link to him; I have a mission for the Spartans."

I've failed. The Forerunner ship exited the atmosphere, and there wasn't any UNSC ship to intercept it. No fighters, cruisers, bombers...nothing. It disappeared from his vision, and he could only imagine that it had jumped into Slipspace, knowing full well that it wasn't welcome here any longer. The rest of the Spartans looked at him, awaiting orders, or at least

guidance. But he was lost in his own thoughts, in the failed mission. There had only been one other, although the difference in the outcome could not even be measured.

John kept looking up until he felt a hand on his shoulder. Immediately recognizing it as Linda's, he instinctively turned towards it and her.

"There was nothing we could have done. That field was just too powerful. There's still work for us to do." Her words rang true in his head, but every atom in him screamed out. Not against it, but not for it. They just screamed.

Hearing something to his immediate right, John turned like lightning and aimed his BR55 right at the head of a Jackal, who lay under rubble, reaching for a plasma pistol. His trigger finger pulsed, ready and waiting to pull itself back just a bit further, to release the burst of bullets into the Jackal's head. Will walked over and simply kicked the plasma pistol away from the Jackal's reach, and turned to John, not understanding what the problem was. But the muzzle still pointed at the Jackal's head, its bird-like eyes widening, as though to plea for help from an imminent doom. This is the enemy. We must take out the enemy. Its either them or us.

"John, snap out of it. It's not going anywhere, and won't be hurting anyone. Just let it go." Her voice rang in his ears, but his hand refused to give up the target, the enemy. Only then did it hit him what was happening and he turned around and punched right through a pile of rubble, obliterating it even more than it already had been. Rage filled his entire being, just for a moment, and then died down again.

"Master Chief," came through his internal speakers, "this is Admiral Hood. A Pelican will be coming to pick you up momentarily. It will take you to New York, where a Covenant capital ship is bombarding the city. They need support desperately. I need you to take the grav-lift and take out that cruiser."

Taking a deep breath and standing up straight, John activated his suit's communication system and opened a channel. "Understood sir. We'll take care of it."

"Good. You're ETA will be ten minutes. The pilots will be rushing it, so hold on tight. One last thing: We may have a possible truce with the Covenant soon, but this ship is one of their rogues. If they have anything that doesn't fire at you, don't fire back at them. But be careful. They probably know about that and may set a trap. And good luck. Admiral Hood out."

As the comm. channel closed, the Pelican came into sight, and landed just 20 meters away from them. "Pile in boys and girls; we don't have any time

to spare!”

The Spartans jogged into the Pelican, climbing through the open hatch on the back of it, and they all sat down in whichever seat they could. It took off quickly, putting at least three g's on everyone. Nothing out of the ordinary. But John sat in thought, so deep that the weight had no meaning to him, as though it were only a shell he was in, yet that he wasn't in it.

Like he was having an out of body experience.

What was I thinking? A flashback of the Jackal played back to him, and nothing in it made any sense. I would never do anything like that. Would I? What's wrong with me? The sound of distant voices kept a strange background hum during his thoughts, although he barely noticed it. As it grew louder and louder, his own thoughts became too hard to understand through the amount of noise he was hearing, and John suddenly snapped back into reality.

His head whipped left, and he realized that he'd been asleep, although it felt like adrenaline had been pumping through him, and his heart rate was up. The time gave justice to him, showing a seven minute lapse that he really couldn't account for. Gazing straight, while wondering how to get his own helmet off and wipe his eyes, Fred appeared in his sight, sitting directly in front of him. Helmet off and eating some military rations, he saw a gauntlet holding food extend towards him, and a smile which was he was too eager to recognize. Then all cylinders started firing again.

“Thanks.” John took the rations and unclipped his helmet, taking it off with his free hand. Never had military rations tasted so good, but, then again, it had been some time since he'd eaten anything.

“Here's to us,” Linda chimed in, holding up her last piece of edible material high above her. “May we live to go on a long vacation, and eat decent food, without ever worrying about the Earth's safety.”

“Amen to that.”

“I second the motion.” They all laughed, except for John, who withheld that luxury because he was the team captain. He simply ate, quietly, focusing on each bite and swallow. For that one moment, he wondered why, as the squad leader, he was supposed to not join the friendly ‘civilian’ conversation, especially now, that their chances of survival could be at a potentially knew low. On that note, he stopped eating for a moment, so he could fix this minor problem. Because in those few minutes of sleep he had, a revelation occurred to him. There are too many problems for him to simply deal with the large ones. If that was all he dealt with, then soon the minor ones would become worse than those already taken care of. It was time to fix everything at once, not one at a time.

“You know, back on the Cairo before we all went our separate ways, I heard a funny one. How many Elites does it take to screw in a light bulb?” Looking across the faces in the Pelican, the answer didn’t really matter, because his team had lightened up from his return so much that anything would suffice. But who am I not to give my team, the best team, the best?

Chapter 23

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 23

“Who was first contact?” The Master Chief held onto a single handlebar, positioned at the mouth of the hatch of the Pelican. It was coming into the city. The view would have been terrific, had it not been for the huge Covenant ship floating above it, encompassing the entire sky, making the huge city seem like a medieval town.

“405th out of Diego Garcia” yelled the sergeant from the cockpit. He stood over the two pilots, holding onto both of their seats to stay standing, while the rest of his platoon, all 4, of them, sat and waited to get back to combat, hoping that the steel between them and a 400 foot drop kept its height. “But don’t expect a big welcome. The Covenant wiped most of them out before they hit the ground.”

The Pelican slowed, then veered right, passing tall buildings that were over the low cloud line. For whatever reason, it seemed like the fog was the only thing not affected by the fighting, still there, although giving a small tactical advantage to all of Earth’s forces. “I can only imagine how pissed those environmentalists are now, seeing that the one thing they’ve been trying to get rid of forever is helping us out more than they are,” quoted a marine from inside the Pelican, reminding John of a news report he’d read before the Covenant came. How ironic, he thought. How typical. Then the Pelican started its descent into the city.

Coming out from the small layer of fog, a battered city showed its face, with every building carrying some sort of battle scar. Broken windows, bullet and plasma scarring, missing floors. The Pelican soared just 50 feet from the ground, and blue streaks of plasma filled the sky, all firing from inside the city. The Covenant had taken command of it. All ground forces would have to be taken care of first, before anyone engaged the cruiser.

This would be a volatile mission.

“Mount up, marines! Dust off in 20!” The ODST’s got their gear in order, getting their helmets on and checking their ammo. Each one made sure their weapons were in perfect firing order, just short of shooting them. John was glad to see that he knew the crew flying with them, although under better circumstances. They were the same marines he’d seen at the Cairo only a few weeks before, who’d threatened him about using their corner in one of the station’s gym’s. Irony...

Passing more buildings, some of them still had lights on throughout most

of them, meaning there wasn't enough time to evacuate everyone properly, and that the Covenant controlled all power within the city, but weren't using any of it. John knew that this wasn't a good thing, because there would be civilians present. He glanced back at his team, and they all gave a short thumb's up, registering his thoughts exactly.

A small landing pad with a lone marine standing near it shown brightly, the lights to help guide the pilots to it. Several tents showed that they'd been here long enough to set up camp, and that there were possibly wounded. First they'd have to find the CO and figure out the exact situation, and work from there.

As the Pelican descended towards the ground, dust and rubble shot out from under it, making the marine cover his face with his arm. As the wheel's touched the ground the Sergeant turned to the crew of the Pelican. "Pile out! Go go go!" The five ODS'T's rushed out, moving as fast as they could. The Spartans followed suit. "I'll evac the wounded. If you need a hand chief, just give us a call."

"Understood. Spartans, get those wounded aboard ASAP." They sent a unified 'acknowledged' signal, and jogged down the ramp of the landing platform. Ahead of him stood a lone marine, while a few others who looked like they'd been through hell and came back with plasma scars the size of their arms sat around it. He walked up to the marine, who held the same weapon as John did, the new SB73. Like the BR55, it only added on to that model, providing a single shot and fully automatic blessing to the mix. What better time to try it out.

"Corporal Perez, A company. Cp's this way," he motioned with his head. Turning and going down the ramp, John followed, setting the new gun to single shot mode. The sun was at the twilight point where it was still too bright to look at without having trouble looking at it, yet calling towards all to watch its magnificence. It reflected off of buildings and ground, and out of those fallen marine's eyes. The only constant in the universe, it appeared.

Following the Corporal, he could see one marine helping another to the landing platform, and behind them were two circular tents. He recognized them as medic's, and saw blood on the ground all around it. "Look, a Spartan" the wounded one said in disbelief.

"I guess the brass do give a shit."

Getting off the ramp, one medic pumped on a marine's chest, yelling at him to come around, but nothing happened. "C'mon, c'mon!" Looking in the tent on his right, one medic and a marine stood over another marine, the medic putting a needle in his arm. "Stay with me marine!"

Running across what used to be the normal road, the sidewalk was filled with more wounded, although John did give a sigh of relief that blood wasn't flowing through the streets. One orange cot carried another marine, and a medic kneeling right next to him. "I'm calling it. It's 1900."

"The lieutenant got hit as soon as we dropped in," said the Corporal, while looking at his superior officer with dismay.

"Who's in charge now?"

"Sergeant Banks. He's pinned down up front. C'mon, I'll show you."

They ran through a blackened room and up the stairs, where several marines traveled through as well, all wounded and on their way to the transport. Turning a corner at the edge of the staircase, a chaingun could be heard rattling, and then stopped. "No no, behind that ST," one marine shouted to the one on the chaingun.

"Yeah yeah yeah."

"Three more, coming left!"

"I'm running low man!"

The Corporal stood behind a wall for cover, and another marine was sitting with his back to the battle behind, being a liaison for all marines to the front. "Hey Parsons!"

"Yeah?!"

"Is it clear?!" Just as he asked, the wall next to Parsons burst in to flames, with rubble flying off from the Plasma fire.

"You tell me!"

"Jesus Christ," Perez mumbled to himself, then turned back to Parsons.

"Friendlies, moving out. Covering fire!" They ran out of their cover and onto the balcony, which gave sight to a huge Covenant turret, around less than half a click from their position. It charged up and fired, but the blast went past the building, and blocked itself from his sight. Checking the ground, John spotted a group of Grunts running across the street, and he toggled his scope, letting off one shot for each one, puncturing their heads. After dropping three, he ran towards another ramp, which led to the CP and the street below.

"Grunts, down low," one marine remarked as he spotted them behind the CP's position, under the ramp. John looked at them from above and they opened fire, hitting his shields once while he unclipped a grenade and dropped it. The Grunts ran wildly around to avoid the blast, but were too clumsy to get away. Checking to see if any were left, their bodies hit the ground with a satisfying thud, giving a clear line to his directive.

A far wall produced another Grunt, but aiming quickly allowed John to blow it away without much fuss. The marines moved in and made sure the

area was clear, making a perimeter. John found the CP lying on a wall near a chaingun next to a dead man. The CP was hit, but not badly. He made his way over and reloaded his weapon.

“Damn, am I glad to see you. Never thought we’d get so much attention.” The Covenant plasma turret loaded another charge, and then fired, hitting a nearby building and shaking the ground underneath them. The building hit was the closest one to them. They would be its next target. “We’ve got to take that thing out. Cover me.” John looked over the ledge, and saw a 15 foot drop, filled with Grunts and Jackals, all heading towards them. Cars littered the streets, as well as randomly placed telephone booths and other street-legal accessories. They may come in handy.

Letting off a few bursts at the enemy, the CP grabbed the dead marine’s radio. “Tech HQ, this is Sergeant Banks. I’ve got hostile artillery 200 meters north-north east of my position. Bring smoke, over!” A group of Grunts ran in between several cars, and John unclipped a grenade and threw it at one of the cars, exploding it and the surrounding cars as well. Smoke piled and more Jackal’s and Grunts came through it. Setting his gun aside, he grabbed hold of the chaingun and rained bullets on the Jackal’s, who couldn’t hold their shields up from the onslaught, eventually dropping them and themselves. Blue blood began to litter the road while more enemies came out from a collapsed building complex just 50 meters ahead of them.

The plasma turret continued firing at the building, trying to drop it, and each blast produced another sun. The heat from each blast scorched his shields, and had a rough influence on the marines. “Dammit HQ, is anybody on this freq?!”

“Sergeant, this is Major Easley. Hang tight, we’re inbound.” Three Longsword fighters flew overhead, letting off a deafening scream. Each one dropped two bombs right on top of the turret, just as it charged to fire. The blast made its previous ones seem insignificant, filling the sky with a light blue. “Verify deliver of ordinance on target.”

“Dead on, Major. Target neutralized.” The Covenant forces stopped coming, and marines ran through the street, stopping any stragglers. Just before John left, the Sergeant got up, clutching his left side, and held out his SMG. “Take my weapon. You’ll need it.” Packing away his SB73, he grabbed his own SMG and held both out. Running out onto the street with the few marines, he let off a short burst into a nearby Grunt and Jackal, and headed towards the collapsed building. Rubble and concrete blocks littered the streets, giving both cover and a weaving path to follow.

The inside of the collapsed building was dark, lit mainly by the gunfire

from both Covenant and UNSC forces. Random bursts of plasma and bullets fired, although the noise of falling Grunts and Jackals rang through John's internal speakers. Moving through the wreckage as fast as possible, a small Covenant force had managed to stay secure in an enclosed area, with only one known entrance and exit. He'd just come upon it.

Turning the corner, plasma fire burst on his shields, barely giving him a moment to find cover. The rest of the marines caught up, and noticing the Spartan had hesitated to enter the enclosure, stopped just short as well. One pulled out a flash grenade and looked directly at John, who nodded. "Grenade out! Cover you're eyes and ears!"

The flash grenade was a special type of grenade, made to stun the enemy as opposed to killing them immediately, and for reasons of damaging the surrounding area or keeping the enemy alive while the user is not harmed. Although they were in ruins of a building, there was still concrete above them, and no one knew how strong it was, or whether it could sustain the blast of the average frag grenade. Three seconds later, it detonated, releasing a chemical induced flash brighter than the sun, and louder than a collision of trains. The Covenant forces, to say the least, were stunned.

"Clear it out!" The marines moved in and opened fire, while their enemy simply allowed it to happen, unable to defend themselves in any way. John opened fire on any targets of opportunity he found, unloading his SMG clips into them. When it was all clear, he made his way across the room, and saw an exit on his right, leading out to the building's other side. He climbed a small ledge of gravel and spotted five Jackals with raised shields, slowly making their way towards him. A Shadow, a Covenant troop transport, moved behind them only twenty meters away. Seeing that he hadn't been spotted, John dropped one SMG and pocketed the other, grabbing the SB73 and toggling the scope.

Opening fire on the nearest target, he missed its head, hitting the shield instead, and getting their attention. They quickly formed a Roman barrier, moving slowly with their shields in front of them, making their way towards him, firing through the small openings on the shield's edge. He reached for a grenade but found only empty space, and aimed as best he could.

The Shadow also opened fire at him, but from the distance, could not pass the gravel barrier as easily as the Jackals. Then two Warthogs drove out from the left of the street, making road kill of the Jackals. The Shadow kept firing but fled, seeing it was outnumbered. "We could use you on the gun, Chief!"

Leaping towards the opportunity, he saw that the drivers and passengers

were those same ODS'T's he flew in with, and gave a quick nod as he grabbed hold of the Gauss rifle on the back. The marine floored it, and another Shadow came out from the right, giving John his first target. Shells came out of the Gauss rifle and into the heart of the Shadow, while the other Warthog, armed with the three barreled machine gun, unloaded into the other side. The Shadow erupted only a few moments later, unable to take the torrent played upon it.

The two Warthogs drove past the wreckage and turned left on the street, giving everyone a view of the open town. Street signs still hung in normal area's, perfectly lit, as well as bill-board advertisements, one of which resembled the same Warthog they rode in.

"More Shadows, down low!" Driving the Warthog on the edge of the street, two more Shadows became visible, floating above the ground under them. John opened fire on the nearest one and the shell hit the cockpit, killing the pilot and disposing of the controls. Another burst tore through its fusion drive, stopping it and killing all within. The other one continued firing at him, and it flared his shields, but didn't drop them. He fired one shot and hit its backside, but a tunnel shielded it from any more fire.

"Meet it on the other side."

"You got it Chief!" The other Warthog sailed past them on the street to their left while they continued on, coming upon another intersection. Several cars stood in the street, waiting for their drivers to return, while a few Jackals used them as cover. Killing two birds with one stone, John delivered a selfless shell into the car, exploding it and the other cars behind it, as well as the Jackals.

Turning on the intersection, the Shadow came into view and John made sure not to miss, unloading another two shells into its front, exploding it near another group of Jackals. The driver followed the windy road, and several Grunts and Jackals became visible from their turn. "Their mine!" yelled the driver, as he kicked the clutch and downshifted, slamming on the gas. John was grateful; he would have felt bad for destroying the road for a few minor enemies.

"Ghosts, making a break for it!" the Australian passenger barked, spotting two Ghosts come from in between buildings. "Quick-"

"I've got 'em," another one shouted from the other Warthog. Letting loose with the machine gun, it ripped through the back of the Ghost, tearing the Covenant metal and making an example of it to its partner, who only lived to see it blow. John fired another shell into it, and it blew right through it and the pilot.

Two more Ghosts came from across the street, firing directly at the

Warthogs. The armored plating held off the fire, but started to melt from the intense heat. Neither soldier on the turrets needed a second opinion. They opened fire on both Ghosts, not giving either a chance.

Driving along the road produced another Shadow, this one heading straight for them. It carried a Ghost in its belly, which John fired at and destroyed, causing the explosion to take the Shadow down with it. Two more Ghosts came into view, and one shot from the Gauss cannon took it out. “That’s one-” said their faithful passenger, watching the other push its turbo jets. The other Warthog drove in from the left and braked right in front of the Ghost, careening it into the air. John shot it midair, giving a blue tinge above them. “-that’s two! C’mon, who’s for more?!” And as though the universe heard his plea, several more came towards them, but John kept his cool and fired one shot at a time, not giving a second chance to any of them.

Suddenly, a Phantom flew above the two Warthogs, firing at both from its three turrets. Each shell that flew into its hull let out a green burst of light, which slowly changed blue, and gave a decorative hole in it. After placing three in it, the driver turned onto another street and a building came between them, but another was flying just above this new street. Firing at the new target, it lowered and dropped off several large things, too far ahead for any of them to make out. “Oh crap mates, we’ve got Brutes!”

They jumped out from the moving Phantom, onto the streets, and opened fire on the Warthogs. The first one toppled over from the fire, while John kept them at bay. The slowed Phantom came directly overhead, and another Brute landed on the hood of the Warthog. He wanted to open fire on it, but at this range, both the driver and passenger would be killed.

The Brute hit the passenger out with such a force, that John knew there would be no way to survive. It then swung its arm around and took out the driver, making the car automatically brake and stop. Jumping out before the Brute could follow, he pulled out his SB73 and ran around the car, then fired two shots directly at where he believed would be the Brute’s heart, and hit it three times in the face with the butt of the gun. More plasma came from behind him, as several Brutes edged closer to him out in the open. Starting to open fire, he noticed another car, hopefully still in working condition, right near the group of Brutes. Firing upon it, the fifth bullet breached the fuel chamber and caused it to explode, throwing the Brutes farther onto the street, where they ceased moving.

Standing in the middle of intersections was always a bad place to be, as he remembered from basic training, and he turned right to see if any more Brute’s were there. The Phantom overhead didn’t seem to notice him, for

the moment, but they would in time. Two more Ghosts came towards him, both piloted by Brutes. He took out his SMG and opened fire on the first one, but only scratched the front of it. The second one he deliberately didn't fire at, but the pilot felt no sympathy and let loose with all the plasma it had. His shields drained quickly, but when it was close enough, John jumped on the wing and kicked the massive Brute off, taking control of the Ghost.

The Phantom overhead now noticed him and opened fire, but he needed to lead it away from where the marines were attacking, at least until they could set up base. He opened fire on the Phantoms, and they started to follow him. Good, he thought, this will give them the time we need.

Turning around, John pushed on the turbo jets and rocketed onto a bridge, where now two Phantoms and two Ghosts followed closely behind. He silently thanked the Covenant genius in making Ghosts so that it could only use the turbo drive when it wasn't shooting, giving him a huge advantage against the other Ghosts. Whenever they opened fire, they fell farther behind, and the Phantom turrets were too slow to keep up with him. Soon, the bridge started to shake from the miss-firing of the Phantoms, making it unstable. The two Phantoms began firing at targets above and ahead of John, hoping they would fall and hit him, allowing them to take out their demon. A huge electronic bill-board loomed ahead and they fired, but it held firm, only collapsing when he had just passed it. One Phantom tried to cut him off, but was hit by the falling bill-board, which crushed a section of its hull and turned it upside down, scraping its topside on the hard concrete.

The Phantom's collapse had caused the underground highway ahead to shut down, and John read an electronic signal display just before he went into it. Highway Access Denied; Automated Highway Shutdown, it read. Slamming on the turbo, smoke of exploded vehicles clouded his sight and made him switch to infrared, where he could see the massive doors closing. Bending down as low as possible, he squeezed the acceleration as hard as he could, and heard the Ghost whine from the stress put on it. Reaching the doors, the top and bottom of the Ghost hit the steel doors and threw him off of it, his armor scraping against the ground as he moved 40 kph, making enough sparks to make any caveman fire-crazy.

The two Brutes in the Ghosts behind him, however, couldn't see past the dense smoke and hadn't heard their target's explosive maneuver. Only when it was too late did either of them notice the closed doors in front of them, at which they had no time to stop. The Chief saw two small explosions through the door, penetrating only the seams.

Standing up, the Covenant cruiser showed up on his HUD, displayed as Nav point alpha. It consumed the entire sky above the city, only giving off a single light from its grav-lift. Then small lights seemed to fall out of the sky. First a few, then tens, maybe hundreds, each one probably coming from the ship. They were similar to the plasma fire given off by the Covenant ships, but something made John think differently. Then five of them landed near him.

Each ODST is forced to, at one time or another, take a suicide fall onto a planet's surface with a small landing pod, made for only one person.

Though the rate of survival has increased exponentially year after year, it still made sure that not everyone would join their group, because of the somewhat insane state of mind one would have to be in to do such things. The five things that landed near him seemed to be some sort of life pods, like those used by the ODST's, and each began opening with a rush of air coming through. Two more landed one only ten meters in front of him, another farther to his left.

Watching the closest one, the front shot out only a few meters to his left, leaving only an open hatch and an Elite, wearing Black armor he'd only seen once before: on the Pillar of Autumn, just before leaving the first Halo ring. They were the best of the best, their elite Elites. This one jumped out and shook his head violently, each jaw tendril swishing with the head's movement. A few more came out, all holding a small light in their right hand, all looking at the one in the center, barking at them. The best he could make out was 'wort wort wort.'

The 'commanding' Elite threw its arm out, and an energy sword came forth from it, while the rest followed suit. John pointed both his SMG's at the Elite, but the noise of a few more to his right took his gaze to them, but his guns still on target. A few on the edges started forming a circle around him, and he backed up, knowing that if they made one that his back would be defenseless. Dropping his right SMG, he grabbed a plasma grenade that he'd taken off a dead Brute and activated it, tossing it towards their leader. It quickly moved out of the way, but another behind it was stuck, and exploded, confusing those immediately near it.

Taking the opportunity, John fired at the Elites who'd been affected by the blast and ran at them, dropping one and taking another's shields down. The other four ran after him, but John was able to fire several bullets in his target's mouth before its partners could intervene. Turning quickly, he threw his gun as hard as possible at another, and it flung its head back hard, but the Elite kept upright. John bent down and grabbed a dropped sword, but an Elite to his right charged and hit him hard, making him drop

it. The Elite tried to tackle John, but could not overcome his strength, and was hit twice so hard that its shields dropped as well. John grabbed its sword arm and made it cut itself in half, then stopped another Elite from doing the same to him by holding half the Elites body, along with its sword. The two swords collided and caused his screen to fizzle for a moment, until he took the other Elites' half body and smashed it into his attacker, throwing it off. It fell to the ground but wasn't out, while the other two lunged at him together, hoping to catch John off guard. He jumped hard and out of their paths, and then landed on one's head, making it collapse under his weight, while throwing his sword at the other and cutting a large gash in its center, taking out its heart.

Only one Elite remained, the one that had to be their leader. It growled at him harshly, but gave no ground to him. Activating another sword, they circled each other, both recognizing the destructive power they both yielded, waiting for the other to strike first. The Elite seemed to be moving its free hand towards its back, meaning it would try to grenade him, so just as it was halfway to its back, John lunged at it. The Elite perry'd and blocked, but barely held John off. He kept swinging at the Elite, but each attack was thrown off. Moving back, the Elite grabbed the upper hand by catching John's sword in between his own using the space inside the two blades of the sword. It turned its sword faster than John expected, but he held on to the shaft firmly. The blades both fizzled and warped, something he was unprepared for and had never seen. The Elite took its chance and threw a plasma grenade at the Chief, but he caught it. The grenade stuck to his hand, and John quickly set all his shields in between his hand and the grenade, and forced it to pulse, shooting it back at the Elite. It exploded on impact.

Bending over for a moment, he panted and tried to catch his breath.

Thinking he saw something in his peripheral vision, John dropped the sword and replaced it with his SB73, aiming it directly at another Elite.

But this particular one had its back to him, and was running away. Why is it...? Thoughts of the Covenant battle over the second Halo ring and of Lord Hood's words rang through, making him lower the gun.

"Chief, where are you? We cleared out all the wounded and most of the City of Covenant ground forces." He was glad to here Fred's voice, and cleared his throat before replying.

"I'm just outside of the city limits, of interstate highway 21. Can I get a pickup?"

"Sure thing. Be there in a few." The channel closed, and John walked over the battlefield he'd just created, and picked up the SMG. It was bent in a

way he'd never seen; almost in half, as though he grabbed the sides and just pulled them both down. Tossing it over his shoulder, John grabbed an energy sword and deactivated it, but heard a noise behind him. Turning quickly, he saw only an old man, with a thin white beard and a younger woman beside him. He waved her off as John made his way towards him. "Sir, you really shouldn't be here, it isn't safe. I'll call for an evac team to pick you up."

"That won't be necessary." The old man spoke English perfectly, but had a Chinese accent, although did not have any extremely well defined characteristics that would show such. "There is something you should know."

"Sir, I must insist-"

"You cannot take me! And you will listen!" the old man snapped. Why doesn't he listen to me? I'm doing this for his own benefit. "You must hear my words, for they only portray the truth which you do not yet understand, yet must."

Now curious as well as somewhat annoyed, John stopped for the moment and listened to the old man. "It is said that one stick is easy to break, but that many are difficult. The more sticks there are to break, the harder it becomes to accomplish." The old man took one out of a pocket and broke it, and dropped the pieces. Then took a handful, as much as he could fit, and tried again, but failed. "Try."

Taking the sticks in his hand, John crushed them easily, with little effort. The old man walked over to a large block of cement, recently taken off of the house behind the old man, perhaps his own. "Can you break this?" This is pointless. "Why should I?"

"If you cannot break it, you may say so." Well, I'm still waiting, so why not. Picking up the cement block, he focused on breaking it, and pushed with all his strength. It started to crack, then broke in half. "You have a gift which few have been granted," the old man said while stroking his beard. "The power to break one stick is possessed by all. The power to break many is possessed by few. But the power to break from something, so strong that it could be considered that each stick were a single atom of it, is something only few ever have been able to accomplish. As I believe less than I have counted with my fingers. Samson was one of them. You are another."

"But this is just a physical strength. It doesn't mean anything for battle."

"Ahh, it has everything to do with battle. And with everything else in life. You see, breaking the stick is a challenge to be overcome, just like fighting a war and feeding an animal. Some are simpler than others. One must

always be aware of how many sticks he can break, for if one loses that, then he loses all. But you can do much more than that. I have seen it. So have you. The enemy force is not simply an enemy, a target. To you, they are but a challenge, as every enemy is. Soon, you will learn this. There are others you must deal with, and they will be heftier than the boulder you had so carefully disposed of. This is what makes you special. Remember, the power is not in your muscle or bones, but in your heart, mind, and soul. You have conquered two of these, yet the third keeps you from where you can be. Find it, and not even the greatest building can plunge you into darkness.”

Two Warthogs drove up the street, turning John’s attention away from the old man. Will drove one while Linda drove the other, Fred holding the turret in Will’s car. “Ready to leave whenever you are, sir.”

“Fine, let me just say good-”turning back to where the old man had been, and seeing him walk back into his house. He let a few seconds pass, where he was completely dumbfounded by what had just happened, but shook it off. “Lets go, we’ve got a cruiser to take down.” Getting on the turret, the light from the Covenant’s ship died, and it started to rise off from its position, going higher and higher into the sky.

“Master Chief, this is comm. HQ. Lord Hood requires you to meet him at coordinates 29344 by 49 as soon as possible.”

“HQ, we’re about five minutes away from those coordinates. Stand by, we are en route.”

“Understood. Comm. HQ over and out.”

“You heard the man, let’s move out. We don’t want to keep the Admiral waiting.”

Chapter 24

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 24

Two Pelicans fought Earth's gravity and atmosphere to leave its magnificence, flying high and away from the single planet that brought life to the simple creatures known as humans. They seemed to fight its pull with a tenacity seen in only one other situation, during a battle. The aircraft, made to be able to work in space, but still meant for air, groaned from the adamant beating its hull took, but as it soared out of the upper atmosphere, the burden lessened to nothing, then it was pulled in the opposite direction.

They're arrival would be in only 15 minutes. The deadline was placed at 20. Smiling briefly, a pull was felt on the back of his white armor, one immediately fixed by a strong pat. They come bearing high hopes, these humans. I must not disappoint them, for without this, they would soon become an extinct race. Only a few life forms were meant for that kind of punishment, and I intend to have my way with them soon. Very soon indeed.

"Master Chief, your orders are simple. Stand firm and ready. Don't give them the slightest impression of anything. This needs to go smoothly, or our entire race could be done for."

"I understand. Sir, what if this is just a plot to lure us in, and kill us while they have the chance. We will be outmanned and outgunned substantially." The intercom played static for a moment, the first Pelican breaching the upper atmosphere, then the other reconnecting the link.

"I've thought of that, although the Elites usually have too much pride to resort to such tactics. In my experience, they'd rather die in battle with honor than have a battle without any, even if more lives are saved."

"True, but they may see the rest of us Spartans as an enormous threat to the completion of their takeover of Earth, and ridding of us might give them the edge they really want."

"Perhaps. I guess we should just hope they don't think like you and I. Regardless, take a full cache of weapons with you. They might see it as a sign of weakness if we don't. And if they're plans are not up to par with the normal standards we've set, and then let loose on them. But make sure

they take the first shot. I don't want to finish this war, especially because of some misunderstanding. Our history has enough of those as it is. Hood, over and out."

Turning back to the seated Spartans, they looked ready to go through hell, come back, and take out every player in this war, all without incident. They relaxed as best they could, and even though they had trained to be prepared for such situations and to be able to handle any amount of stress, this was different. The actions they take today could shape the fate of humanity for the rest of time. Or, if things go poorly, until tomorrow. His own thoughts turned back to the old man he'd seen only a short time ago, as he pondered exactly what he meant. But the only thing he had understood was that he didn't understand. He could break more than one stick. So? I can break a lot of sticks, with and without the armor. It makes it easier to break. I couldn't break the rock without it. But what did he mean by it?

The military academy had taught classes meant for understanding encryptive sayings, messages, etc., to search for hidden meanings behind them. This was one class he wished was part of the Spartan program. Taking the memory apart, turning it around, and trying to understand it as best he could only made it harder to grasp, as though the meaning were just within arm's reach, but whenever he tried harder, it flew farther away. "Chief. Chief!" John snapped out of his dazed state, and craned his head over to the sound of Linda's voice. "Sleeping on the job again?" "No, not really," he said, smiling at how no matter what he said would indicate that he actually was sleeping. "I was just thinking about what happened just past the closed section of highway 21." "What, with the huge body count you left there?" "No. It's a short story, but we have time..."

The Covenant ship was small, smaller than any flagship seen before, and they had seen quite a few. It still had the same exact color and look of constant purple in different shades. John had always wondered why everything aboard was purple. At first he thought because the substance the ship relied on mostly was simply that color, although there was no way of truly telling. Then the idea of using it as a relaxant came to mind, and knowing that the Covenant were a highly spiritual group of races also supported this theory. This may not be the best time to ask, but perhaps soon.

The entire landing bay was empty, except for two Elites that John had recognized as honor guards. Their bright orange and black suits stood out

tremendously to the ship, giving the perception that they were more powerful than it, as though the space around them pushed the ship away to bear their presence. Both wielded energy swords, yet they remained inanimate. Admiral Hood and a few other high ranking officials exited their Pelican, and the Elites started walking out towards a door on the far side of the landing bay.

None of the officials were recognized by anyone but Hood, but they were not questioned either. With the situation on Earth, it wasn't doubtful that they were the replacements for the previous leaders, who had been killed in the conflict. As they walked across the landing bay, John and Will took point in front of Hood and the rest, while Fred and Linda stayed back and watched their six. This was customary for any meeting between current enemies, although John wasn't sure how the Covenant would see it, or at least the Covenant he was meeting with. He quickly checked his ammo count and made sure to put his gun on fully automatic. If all hell broke loose, he'd be ready.

Panting. Screaming for air. Clawing for just a gasp. The blackness of space gave no warmth, and only lulled death for a new pray. Air tank running low, only a few minutes left. Must reach the ship!

Opening eyes. Stars all around, with the sun in view as well, but just another distant star. Only one stuck out, the target. It glowed from the sun's reflection, but was still too far to reach. To destroy. There must be vengeance, a last plea from a fallen race. Nothing could stop him. Stay focused, don't stop breathing. Just stay awake a minute longer and that monster will be gone forever.

The hallways were just as every other Covenant ship he'd ever been on, but John didn't take any notice to that. The path they took had been cleared of all personnel, perhaps as a sign of courtesy, or just for the easy kill. His finger stayed glued to the trigger, and his eyes darted in every direction, scrutinizing any dark spot or corner. He also wished Cortana was here. Her input would be invaluable in this situation, as she could get into the Covenant battle net and tell him what the hell was going on. Being blind while surrounded by fire was never John's idea of a good time. Taking a left on one corridor, then a right on another, more and more doors gave way for the group, allowing them to pass through. The two Elites never looked back, and kept a firm grip on their energy swords. John turned and nodded to Will, who immediately understood what he wanted, and thought appropriately. If it were a trap, those two would try to cut them

down first, giving way for the Earth representatives. A plan formed, and if this was a trap, there would be no surprises, and definitely no mercy. Another door opened in front of them, but this one didn't lead into another hallway, but rather a large chamber. Elites cluttered about the center of the chamber, all discussing some matter or other, but there were too many conversations to decipher. The two honor guards led them towards this epicenter, where the Elites moved out of the way, allowing their group to pass. At the center was a single Elite in a special white armor, one that John had never seen before, but he knew that this one ranked highly above the rest.

Three other Elites also wore an unknown armor, all identical to each others. They wore a large headpiece, which only reminded him of some kind of antelope's horns. Their armor was much darker than any other in the room, a very dark tone of grey. They stood directly behind the white-armored Elite.

"The negotiations," said the Elite in a slow but eloquent English, "will now begin."

"We hope you'll agree to the deal," said a dead voice, from a dead captain's daughter. For a split second, they all stood in shock as they looked for the source of the voice and found it, astounded. If the Covenant attacked, no human would have survived at that moment.

Just crack the hull and break through. Focus. Don't lose focus. Break through. Slamming against the bulkhead as hard as possible only dented the seemingly living ship, surviving out in the cold of space. Only a minute of air left. Harder and harder, the hull started to give way. A crack opened and gave the chance to grab the bulkhead from the inside and pull it off, allowing passage into the beast.

Falling in, pressure leaked from the hall, causing the doors ahead to close, but he had jumped through already. They know I'm here. I have to work fast. Taking a breath of fresh air, thoughts began to flow clearer. Catching his bearings and placement, his vision returned to normal and he clearly saw several Grunts ahead, all walking slowly away from him.

Running behind them and snapping their neck's one by one silently, the only thought that came to mind was whether or not their neck's worked the same in relation to humans. They stopped moving, and that was all that mattered for the time being. Elites ran in, probably to see what had happened with the bulkhead, and he hid in a small dark corner, and stealthily left after they had passed.

Commander Keyes? The talks were underway, but John, as well as everyone else in the room, was dumbfounded by the Commander's presence aboard the Covenant ship. Only a few days before, all he knew of Keyes was that Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, had captured her and Sgt. Johnson to activate Halo, but hadn't succeeded. But her being here, in this amount of time? Truthfully, it seemed quite possible, but highly improbable. This would be a story for the ages.

The only downside was that nobody was at the luxury to hear that story, for more important matters ensued. The talks seemed to be going smoothly and quite well for the UNSC. For humanity. Still, he felt in no position to judge, but it was a relief to know that this wasn't some trap set for them, to take out the leaders of Earth. Funny, he thought, that our original mission was to do just that. The universe seems to run on irony.

Everyone else in the room simply watched the discussion, making a circle around the two main leaders. Suddenly, one Elite wearing red armor rushed in and was stopped, where his message was received by another higher ranking Elite. The message led from him directly to the white-armored Elite, who before hearing it excused himself from the conversations momentarily. He then whispered to the Elite, although John's translation system was able to pick up on it.

"This meeting was ordained by the Arbiter, and you dare disrupt it with any petty matter? You dishonor all Elites, and will be punished for this insubordination. Deal with this problem as you see fit, and do not interrupt again."

"I only wished to concern you with this matter because it has to do with them," hinting towards John and the other Spartans. "Another demon has been spotted on board, and has already killed 15 of our warriors, as well as many of the lesser ones. I believe these 'talks' to be a deception, for them to gain control of this vessel."

"Do you have proof of this?"

"Only the body count." As the white-armored Elite turned away and started to come back to the center, John gave a slight hand signal to his Spartans, and they were ready for a fight. He had no idea who or what this other 'demon' was, but he wouldn't let it stop the possible survival of the human race.

"Humans, can you explain this treacherous attack on our vessel?"

Lord Hood gave a hard look at the Elite. "No. We have no knowledge of such an attack."

"Then I will explain. One of them," pointing at the Spartans, "has infiltrated this vessel from outside and has killed a portion of the crew. If it

does not stop immediately, then you will all be killed, along with your planet.”

“Wait! There aren’t any more Spartans alive. Whatever is attacking you isn’t with us!” Desperation showed on the tired man’s face, as he was so close, and suddenly had lost grasp of success. The Elite continued to look at him, while others yelled in their own dialect, too many for John to interpret. He stepped forward.

“Do you know where this one is located?”

“No. It continually evades us, and we have been unable to find its location at all.”

“Fine. As a sign of goodwill, we will find and take down this threat. Pull all your forces back and seal all areas, and we will deal with it.” Giving it a thought, other Elites protested, but this one nodded its head. “Spartan’s, move out.” He heard the orders to follow his suggestion from the Elite leader, but worried more about who could be doing this. The only other Spartan that had survived was Kelly, but her whereabouts were unknown. And if it was her, was Dr. Halsey here as well?

Heading out the first door into the rest of the ship, John’s motion detector displayed an irrational character, a static blip that was not registered as a friend or foe. It went right through his position, cut out momentarily, and then was behind him. Looking up, the room was tall enough for something to be on the ceiling, and he knew that his motion sensors could not penetrate the ground of Covenant ships, so he had just found his target. Whatever it was, it was fast. Not wanting to startle anyone in the room, thus giving away the fact that they knew it was in the same room, John slowly moved out the door, but motioned to his team where the target was. His motion sensor stopped showing the static, and the last point it was at was directly over the white-armored Elite.

Then it fell, and John dashed at the point it was going to land in. “Get down!” he yelled, although he doubted it would do any good. The Elites simply drew their swords and prepared for an attack, exactly the opposite of what he wanted. Knowing that whatever it was would simply be cut down, John lunged directly where it was going to land, and tackled the hard and heavy being. The sound of metal on metal, scrapping the ground underneath was enough to shake anyone, and everyone in the room was aware of the attack and waiting to strike down their foe.

John was simply in too much shock to say anything or do anything, including letting go of his new prisoner. So was James, who simply sat still, not having any idea of what was going on exactly, but too tired to stress the issue. He would wait for a reasonable explanation.

Chapter 25

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 25

0634 Hours, August 30, 2552

UNSC vessel Circumference, Epsilon Eridani system near Reach station Gamma

“Take cover,” he heard the Master Chief say over the intercom. Setting up the explosives as best he could, James finished tying them down when all hell seemed to break loose. “Blue two, I said fall back.”

At that point, it was already too late. James looked up only to find a swarm of pink needles heading straight for him, and in the nonexistent gravity of space, there would be no escape. Setting full power to shields, he braces for impact as best he could, but there was little hope or time. His shields vanished, but before he could take a breath of air he was flung off the hull of Circumference, where the mission was to destroy the ship’s database to prevent that knowledge from falling into Covenant hands. They could not be allowed to find battle plans, strategies, Earth.

One of the needles must have hit his jet pack, because he was being thrust off the hull and in every direction at once. There wasn’t enough time to focus on anything because of the speed he spun at, but he managed to slip out of it. “Blue-come in!” Static washed over the entire message, cutting out some parts of it, but James was able to make out the message. He grabbed the harness and covered the punctured area with a special solvent inside his ammo pack, but kept a hand over it, unsure whether it would work.

“Can control the jet pack”, he replied, but reminded himself that most of the message would probably cut out. Looking up at the Circumference, he spotted a worse problem that he would have than losing control of the jetpack again: an entire Covenant force standing out there, all targeting him. “They’ve gone onto the hull! Be warned, they’re everywhere!” Before he managed any more, several bursts of plasma shot out at him. His shields were too low and too weak to sustain him from the firepower heading towards him, so he took his hand off the jetpack, hoping the solvent hadn’t worked. Ironically, it did, and several shots managed to splash across his shields and drop them, while James simply did the best

he could to maneuver away from the rest of the shots.

None managed to open his Mjolnir armor suit to the depths of space, but more shots were under way, and he was sitting there naked. Reviewing his situation, he could only see two solutions: use the jetpack as a shield against the oncoming barrage, and hope that it leaks again and allows him to get the hell out of there, or discharge his MA5B to propel him out of the way. Firing it would be much slower and controlled, and safer, but he might need the ammo later on, and he wasn't sure whether it could move him in time.

Placing the pack in front of him, James spied the smallest plasma burst and let it hit his pack, shooting it and him off at an obscene angle, and giving him a feeling of motion sickness he had never felt. Under the circumstances, he was glad that such a feeling seethed through his skin; it let him know he was still alive. Twisting and turning the pack hard, he managed to gain control of it again, but the gash was so large that the fuel would be spent much too quickly for him to reach any desired destination, or at least any destination to help finish his mission. For James, the new mission was to find a way back to any UNSC vessel, and the only one in the area he knew of was the Pillar of Autumn. The only other option was reaching the Reach station Gamma, which might not be around for much longer if the Covenant didn't like the way it looked.

More plasma fire came at him, but missed as he increased his speed. The fuel gauge already showed only a quarter of fuel left, and he knew there was no way it would get him to any of the two choices he had for survival. So he headed towards the enemy. The blue and green plasma streaked past him, moving too slow to hit him as James maneuvered past the randomly placed bolts. About halfway to the hull of the Circumference, the fuel was all spent, and he pushed the empty pack away from him, slightly adjusting his course and decreasing his speed. At that point, he was moving too fast to control, although if he threw the pack in front of him, the Covenant forces might see it as their target, not knowing exactly what they were firing at the first place, and the pack would partially eclipse him from their sight.

The open path to the ship was all he needed.

Covenant followed his plan precisely, firing more and more plasma into the pack, only melting it into more obscure shapes, while James was able to pull out his M6D pistol and stow away the heftier assault rifle, but waited to land right in the middle of his targets before firing. Each shot would slow him down and attract attention, while when he landed he'd be much more stable. At that point, one lone enemy opened fire on him. The

shot was too slow to not avoid, but he was too far to let that one thing alert the rest. He aimed and fired, letting out a single bullet straight through the beast's head.

From the reports he'd read, the crippling blow reached a Jackal, a Covenant creature that looked birdlike, having skinny arms and legs and a long snout. The light orange skin color and dark eyes reminded him of a mix of eagle and iguana that took a long swim in an off-orange paint mix, but that didn't stop them from firing at him. The carcass bounced off the hull and was noticed by a few more Jackals and Grunts, smaller and stumpier creatures. They looked around and tried to find what had killed their partner, although finding James must have been much more difficult without the bright white thruster on him, and his dark jade fit nicely with the blackness of space.

Jackals, however, also had impeccable eyesight. One spotted him when he was 50 meters from the hull, and alerted the rest. They all opened fire independently, forcing James into maneuvers he'd never known he was capable of. Bending in every direction, this seemed like the ideal time to rid of the nuisance, and opened fire. Plunging several bullets into the front line warrior, they drifted off into space, blocking the view of him for the others to fire. Edging closer to the ship, James dropped all of the Jackals and Grunts before they could get a clear shot at him. The second he hit the ground, he polarized the soles of his boots, putting a current through them and keeping them planted on the metal hull.

The hull was clear of all Covenant forces, but there was no entrance to the ship anywhere in his vicinity, and there was only another five minutes of air left in his suit. Opening a channel on all UNSC frequencies, all that played through was static, meaning that his suit was not powerful enough to reach either possible destination. He'd have to find a way out himself. Cycling through his nav points, the Circumference was displayed as nav point alpha, the objective. The Pillar of Autumn was displayed as nav point beta, although it was nowhere to be seen. Lastly, nav point gamma was the Reach station Gamma, which was directly in above of him, several kilometers away from his current position.

Strange, he thought, the Circumference was docked to it. Maybe it never was docked, but the battle shook it off. But how did it get this far out? He looked up and saw it almost directly overhead, and scoped out the total distance with his suit, and found it to be 1.385 kilometers. There was no time to question this; the station moved farther away with every passing second. A plasma pistol floated right into his point of view, and he grabbed it, holding the M6D with his right hand. Aiming as best he could, James

pushed off as hard as he could on the Circumference's hull, kicking him at a steady pace towards the space station.

Running through the empty station gave James a cold shiver down his back, the only light available coming from his own helmet. He ran around, trying to find something he could use to get off this useless hunk of metal...an escape pod, enclosed detachable compartment, anything. There was no way he could get back to Reach or to any UNSC ship close enough to the planet to help out without better means of transportation, but every life pod was missing, and all computer systems were dead.

Continually turning his head left and right to find some route for escape, despair began to cloud his judgment. As he started to think that there would be no way off this station, his personal training kicked in, a program he'd worked hard to get himself working and focused. Why are you a Spartan?! Why are you here?! Do you know why?! Because you worked your ass off every second of every minute of every day, that's why! You never give in, and you never will! The second you do, I'm going to jump out of this suit and throw you out an airlock myself, and keep the comm. open so you can hear me laughing!

His view immediately sharpened, his pace increased, everything started to work better and faster. After years of Spartan training, James had always found himself to be the laziest of the crew, but hated being the last one in everything, or simply being the least caring. He loved what they did, and wouldn't give it up for the world, but for whatever reason, he was just lazy. So every day, he forced himself to wake up at least 15 minutes before everyone else, fire at least ten more bullets than everyone else, finish in at least the top ten. James knew he wasn't the best, but the drive he had kept him in the highest echelon of the Spartan ranks.

Because of this, every mission wasn't just something to complete in order to help out the UNSC or a fellow soldier, but something to prove himself that he was able to do, something to show that he wasn't the one marine who couldn't, for whatever reason. No matter what the injury, how much pain there was, or how impossible success seemed, he always pulled through, because of the push he put on himself. Nothing that Sgt. Mendez could have said or did could scathe the depth of what James had set for himself, which simply didn't allow for failure. Hell, the word wasn't part of his vocabulary any longer.

Having ran through at least half the station and not seeing a single way off didn't halt him at all, only made him go faster. A few rooms back he noticed a ton of spare shuttle parts, and took a mental picture of the room

number incase he'd need any of the parts inside. Room 209 B. As he continued on, he laughed to himself, wondering why the Covenant forgot about this random station, and why they didn't just blow it out of space. But he dismissed the thought quickly, not wanting to mistakenly send some telepathic message that he wanted the station to be destroyed, especially while he was on it. Maybe the lack of Oxygen is getting to me, he thought.

Almost back to where he had started from, two vacant escape pods sat silently only 30 meters from where he had entered from. He almost hit himself in the head for missing them, although it was difficult to see in the dark, and he needed to decide a path to take. I'll laugh at this later.

Tapping the control panel, nothing happened. Trying again, no light came from it, and James could only guess that all the systems were down, including those for the escape pods. That also meant life support was dead, and that the air he was breathing would be gone quite soon from the hole he made getting it.

The eerie darkness and quiet might have been getting to James, although he also thought that the situation was hilarious. He couldn't help it. Every system was off, he missed the life pods and went around a station three kilometers in diameter only to find the escape pods right next to where he started, and now all the power was shut off. As though the universe could do anything else to make his day. Pulling his right hand back and balling it into a fist, James smashed the control pad, hoping to open it by any power left over in the station from failsafes. It didn't.

So James grabbed the door and the bulkhead, and pulled apart as hard as he could. It slowly gave way, and when he could fit himself through, he stopped and got in. He jumped into the cockpit and hit several controls, but none of them responded, also having no power. James opened up a small panel on the left arm of his suit, and took out a wire and connected it into a small port on the console in front of him. Setting his suit to act as a defibrillator, he pulsed the ship once, waited for his own power to recharge, then tried again. Still not working, he gave it one more try.

The escape pod's lights flickered on and all systems became functional. The door behind closed as best it could, and fired off warning signs that the air pressure would drop slowly after leaving the station. Not caring, he punched the keys in furiously, wanting to get off the station and back into battle. In no time at all, it flew back towards Reach, where he could help out his team.

Searching the sky above the planet Reach was devastating, to say the least.

Reach, where James was raised, trained, and had spent most of his life, was being swarmed by Covenant vessels. How long was I in that station? But it didn't matter anymore. The Covenant always gassed the planets they managed to take control of, and this one would be no different. All of the Spartans, with the exception of Linda, John and himself were down there, fighting to stay alive. All the Super Mac guns were not in orbit anymore, nor could they be considered Mac guns.

The air inside the escape pod was running very thin, and James set his suit to pressurize most of it inside his suit, then close it off from the venting atmosphere. It would only give him around ten minutes of breathing time, but it would have to do.

A lone spatial distortion came through on his computer monitor, a very erratic one, meaning that a UNSC had escaped, but he could only guess which one. He was not at the luxury to look behind the escape pod, as it was never meant to look back at its previous destination, and therefore had no aft cameras. Trying to get a read on the ship was also a waste, as it was already gone while the computer scanned its long UNSC vessel code.

Several more slipspace ruptures opened, with at least six Covenant corvettes going through, and more heading away from Reach. Some of them seemed to be on a direct course for him, but there wasn't enough power on the ship to maneuver with, and he couldn't waste any of it anyways. He powered down all systems and let the pod drift in the direction he set, and hoping that the Covenant wouldn't get too curious about what he was doing.

It was strange that all those Covenant ships had gone to track one lone vessel that managed to escape. James knew that the Covenant were very thorough, but this seemed ridiculous. Why chase one ship? The Pillar of Autumn?

Eight minutes of air left. This was no time to wonder about the mysteries of the universe, especially while he knew that the Spartans down on the ground would still be alive. Checking the distance from him to Reach, there was no way he could reach it in the small escape pod. There had to be another way...

Scanning the surrounding area of anything he could use, he found that there were still many wreckages of fallen UNSC cruisers, frigates, corvettes, etc. He needed to find one with a working propulsion system, and with some working atmosphere. The problem with that was the Covenant did a good job of cleaning up after themselves. They would soon target the wreckages and rid the surrounding area of anything Human. For now, it seemed safe enough, and the Covenant continued to orbit Reach.

Five minutes. Damnit! James initiated the scan, but he didn't know whether he had the time or not. With the huge debris field, it could take the computer from a matter of minutes to days to complete. He stopped the scan and reset the parameters to something more fitting for his situation, and set all power to the scanner.

As the computer searched for more hospitable settings, he got up and checked the rest of the pod, hoping to find something that may come in handy. All of the seats were supposed to carry first aid kits inside them, but none did. He checked the very back and a lone kit, containing anything he'd need for quick field repairs. There was also a backpack with a few clips of ammo for his MA5B and M6D. Tossing the first aid in the pack, he turned to the other side of the pod and searched, but found nothing.

Coming back to the 'captain's' chair, he noticed on the right a small cylinder, completely bronze and quite capable of saving his life.

The air tank would come in quite handy, especially if he didn't find a place with a localized atmosphere in the next three minutes. It read full, and he popped it in the pack, and slipped it on.

'Scanning complete', read the computer. Three ships came onto the screen, the Liberty, Triumph, and Queen Mary. The Queen Mary and Liberty were too far to reach with the few minutes of air he had left, but the Triumph would do. Setting an intercept course for it, James gave all the power over to engines and made best speed to his new frigate.

The inside of the Triumph was all but welcoming, pitch black and very cold. The external temperature made sure that if James ran out of air, he wouldn't be able to use the air tank because he'd end up freezing to death. Instead, because he was in a huge rush to find a spot where he could breath freely, the air tank played a support role, giving him a boost throughout the hull.

Staying as close as possible to it, he searched for a way in, but every layer of metal had melted over itself, closing the entire ship off from the outside. Only a minute left on his air countdown, James forced his heartbeat and breathing to slow down, knowing that he couldn't waste any of it. He'd done this before as well, but now counted more than ever. Setting his motion tracker on maximum, a small blip appeared on it, just at a portion of the hull to his left.

Quickly making his way there, more blips appeared, indicating that people were still alive inside, and that there was breathable air; both a plus and minus. Having any extra marine around would help out tremendously, and it at least gave him the satisfaction of knowing some were still alive. But

because they were inside, he couldn't tear through the hull like he did before. There would have to be a way around.

But I've searched the surrounding area already! Trying to figure out what options he had left put a shiver down his back, as he found none. The lack of breathing was getting to him, and he put his hand on the hull, by accident slamming against it. Then voices played through his head, very quiet, but voices nonetheless. He turned up his internal speakers as loud as possible, and the voices could be made out quite legibly. They were from inside the ship, and his hand was carrying the sound through the hull and his suit to him.

They heard the crash against the bulkhead, and were yelling something.

"Control panel-left 20 meters-keycode 631-airlock." Getting the immediate drift, James flew over to the described destination, and found the console, which seemed to be dead, but he now had a feeling that it wasn't. Pushing in the code, the doors opened, and he tumbled inside, his lungs now burning for air. The doors closed behind him and the hissing of air became audible, but James simply sat very still, keeping his focus, staying awake. Staying alive. When the opposite doors opened, he nearly collapsed and lost consciousness, but he fought the darkness, refusing it from taking him. There was no time to black out.

He was able to make out several figures standing over him as he panted, catching his breath. Limping on the ground, he heard one say, "Wow, what happened to that special Spartan training?"

Looking up, James shook off the black spots in his eyes and got up. "I'm here, aren't I? Where's the CO?"

"Dead," another one said. "And so are the next 20 in line afterwards."

Sighing, James saw the distraught in the eyes of these soldiers, these marines. "Fine, I'm taking command of this vessel. Is this the entire crew?"

Silence was the only answer, but he knew that the Covenant could turn on them at any moment, and there wasn't time to spare. "When I ask a question, I expect an answer. Is that clear?"

"What's the point?" A skinny blond-haired man to his right looked at the ground, holding a loaded pistol. "We're all going to die anyways."

"Not on my watch. If we work together, then our chances of survival will only be greater. For that, I need cooperation."

"Yes, this we're what's left of the crew," a dark haired and beat woman said, looking as though she was in the part of the ship that exploded. James counted 16 people in the single room, several of which were injured. He would need as many able bodies as possible.

“I need to know everything left on this ship that we have. Equipment, food, weapons, the lot. Do we have a running computer system and an AI?”

“Negative sir, the AI was terminated as soon as the ship was demobilized, but the computer system should be operational. We haven’t tried it though, because the Covenant might pick up on it and blast us out of the sky.”

“That’s a chance we’re going to have to take. Search the ship of all sectors with and without atmosphere and for anything we could use. And find out how much air we have left.”

“Yes sir!”

“Is there a doctor here?”

“Yes, I’m a doctor.” A dark man came forward, holding a first aid kit and a small smile.

“I need an assessment on all the crew members, including yourself, with physical conditions. I need to know what everyone can take.”

“Yes, right away. What about yourself? I can give you a quick check up if you like.” James hadn’t actually thought about his own health, probably for too long, but there were people definitely worse off than him.

“No, I’m 100%.” The doctor nodded and headed off, giving James a chance to run a quick bioscan. He hadn’t been hit by any plasma, although he got close enough, and it showed him in top condition, other than a minor lack of oxygen to his brain. Nothing he wouldn’t get over in a few minutes.

“Sir, I’ve got what you asked for.” Walking over to the computer system, an list of items were available. It read:

Inventory

Food storage: missing

Weapons cache: destroyed

Atmospheric pressure: 90% average

Water storage: missing

Fuel: measured at 40%

Cryogenic freezing tubes: operational

“Ok, then I’ll need to know if we have any of the necessities available and ready here. Food, water, whatever. The atmospheric pressure is leaking, and I need that leak found and stopped, or its going to get real cold real soon, and we can’t risk that. You”, pointing to the first able-bodied marine he saw, “try to find that leak. Take whomever you need.”

“Yes sir!”

“Ok, so we have fuel, which means we might be able to get out of here.”

Leaning closer to the screen to make sure he didn’t misread it. “Where are those cryo tubes?”

“Unknown. Searching now.” Taking a moment to look around, James finally noticed the full extent of the problem. With maybe enough food and water for a few days, and only enough fuel to get around a few of the neighboring systems, he needed a plan to get out of there. And fast.

“They’re two stations over, just outside the open spot. Only you’ll be able to get to them.”

“How many are there?”

“I show 50, but 34 are dead in space. There are also 27 more being occupied, but I can’t tell whether their still working.”

“Fine, I’ll get them. You’re in command...”

“Alper, Sir. Any orders before you get them.”

“Plenty. Is this the only space left, or are there more rooms with breathable atmosphere?”

“There are two more rooms, but they’re hit pretty bad.”

“That’s fine. Have a few people go to each room. We need to conserve the air reservoir collected here, at least for the time being. And get me a list of all working systems when I get back.” With that, James headed back for the airlock. With 90 minutes of fresh air at his disposal, he didn’t want to waste a second of it.

Getting back out of the airlock was much more comfortable than the first time, even though the load wasn’t nearly as great. As he reached the new bridge, Alper ran up to him. “Alper reporting, sir! I have the information you asked for.”

“Good. Do we have propulsion systems?”

“Negative. The closest thing we have is the Slipspace drive, which is fully functional.”

“Good, charge it up nice and slow. Did they find the air leak?”

“Yes sir, and they patched it up. But the life support is basically shot, with only the air recycling system working at half capacity. We’ve tried repairing it, but nothing’s worked.”

“It’ll have to do. Do we have any other means of transportation?”

“There may be one working Pelican, but it’s stuck down in docking bay 23, which is sealed off completely. Other than that, it’s perfectly ready to head out.”

“How about the air? How much do we have left?”

“Enough for two, maybe three days. Nothing more. Not with everyone we have in here.” A plan started to form in James’ head, a way of escape. He turned back to the cryo tubes, and counted them again. He calculated their dimensions to that of the inside of the Pelican if it were stripped clean.

Lastly, he counted the crew members. 16 cryo tubes and 17 people here. And someone has to pilot the Pelican... "Sir?"

"I've got an idea. Get everyone here."

"Yes sir!" She ran off and grabbed everyone who was able to get up and come over, and the crowd circled James, as he finalized the plan in his head. When everyone assembled around him, he set his external speakers to be just a twinge louder, just so everyone would hear him. If they missed it, there might be fatal repercussion.

"Alright everybody, listen up. We may be able to get off this boat and back to Earth, but it's a long shot. Everyone will go into these cryo tubes, and I'll put you all in a deep freeze. There's enough space in that Pelican to fit all of them with you inside, and that's exactly what we'll do. The power generator in the Pelican will be able to give power to all of them quite easily, meaning everyone will be able to stay that way for a while. We'll program the ship to open a small Slipspace opening just in front of us, small enough so the Covenant might not detect it, but big enough for the Pelican to go through. Then it'll fly directly to Earth, which should be about a month trip. And from there, a distress signal will be let out, and we'll be picked up."

"Wait, the Covenant will be all over us as soon as we open a rift to Slipspace. How are we going to avoid that?"

"We won't. They won't see it coming. I can set the rupture to be so small that it would appear like static on their systems."

"Wait wait wait," the blond-haired marine said, holding both palms out.

"You said there were only 16 cryo tubes. But with you, there's 17 of us. What's the deal?"

"No deal. You all get in the cryo tubes while I pilot the ship. When you get back to Earth, you are to report to wherever you get sent."

"But sir, you are much more needed than the rest of us," Alper broke in.

"We're expendable. You aren't."

"Nobody is expendable, and as the CO here, I am ordering everyone to follow my instructions to the letter, no questions asked."

"Sir, I'll go in your place."

"You can't pilot the Pelican Alper. And nobody else will take my place whether they can or not."

The blond haired marine's head darted back and forth between the two of them, then finally let out a blood curling scream. "Both of you are going!" He then proceeded to draw a pistol from a hidden holster, and pointed it straight at his head. "Both of you are getting in those cryo tubes! I'm the only pilot on board, and I'll be taking us in."

“Put the gun down marine. That’s a direct order.”

“No! Why should I follow you’re orders when they are wrong! Alper’s right; we’re expendable. You’re a Spartan, a super soldier. You are supposed to be our last hope against the Covenant! I can’t let you go down like this.”

“Fine. Just give me the gun, and I’ll let you pilot the Pelican-”

“No way! I know you guys are smart! You’ll just take the gun and force me into that cryo tube, and take my place. This gun stays pointed right here until I see you get in the freezer.”

Trying to think his way out of this situation seemed pointless, but James could only smile at the marine. He was willing to give his life for another soldier, and would even force it if necessary. “Ok, you win. Everyone keep a three meter radius away from this marine. I don’t want any accidents going on. Let’s get to work people, we don’t have much time and there’s too much to do!”

As everyone able went off to prepare for the mission, he went up to the marine, and extended his hand. The marine cocked the gun. James pulled his hand back quickly, but smirked at the soldier, who gave the same back.

Giving one last check to all the systems. Cryo tubes, check. Slipspace program, check. Course settings for Earth, check. The cryo tubes were stacked on top of each other to make room for them all, and on the edges two were on their sides. James had to set his above the rest, which we wasn’t sure whether it would be stable because of the weight of the suit, but it was a necessary risk. If anything happened, he would have to get out and get everyone else out, something that they wouldn’t be able to do without his strength in moving the top ones off the bottom ones.

The pilot, a Private Sammy Deekes, gave the thumbs up to him just before he entered the last one himself. After getting in, Deekes waited a good few minutes and checked the tube, making sure it was secure like the rest of them. Satisfied, he started up the engines, very gently, and the Slipspace program countdown timer was displayed on a screen to his right. Thirty seconds.

Deekes was immediately reminded of his first car, an old beat up Scorpion, the hottest car 20 years before he got it. It was a piece of junk, barely able to run, even though it looked good. But after 2 years of scrounging up money and working hard on it, he brought it back to life, gave it style, and an engine that could mow down anything else around. The first time he drove it in a street race, he new he was going to win, that the other guy had no chance. He had that feeling again.

United Nations Space Command Transmission
11932Q-13

From: Private First Class Sammy Ryan Deekes

To: Lisa Zansky (civilian identification number: 10144-349-GQS8374)

Subject: None

Classification: Personal Log Entry

/start file/

Lisa,

It's been so long since I last saw you. Your golden hair, shiny eyes, beautiful dark eyes. I can imagine your physical beauty as my last thoughts as I travel with a crew in the darkness of space, but it's cold can never reach me. Not while you are here with me.

Reach has fallen. There was nothing anyone could do. I know your family was there, and I'm sorry. We gave it our all, but they were just too strong. Too powerful.

But never mind that. All I want to think about now is you, and your beauty. But not just the physical beauty, everything. I will miss our great talks, the loving conversations that would last all night, the elegant way you did everything...

I just hope that I've been the best I could be for you. I regret missing your last birthday, and our anniversary. But it was necessary. I love you Lisa. That's what I'm fighting for. For a life for you, and our child. As long as nobody forgets what we fight for, we cannot lose this war. I have faith, and you must too. Take care, and keep your head down, but your spirits high. It's all we have, at least for a little while.

With love,
Sammy

Chapter 26

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 26

0742, August 30, 2552
UNSC vessel Triumph near Reach

Taking the Pelican out of the docking bay would be more difficult than Deekes had imagined. No, that's not it, he thought to himself. The situation was not terrible, but he was making it worse. He went over the plan the Spartan had left for him to follow. Fire at the blast doors until they break open, evade any Covenant ships that may be around, and get through that Slipspace portal. Once inside, I'll only be inside for a few minutes, because this thing can't take too much of a beating, even with the reinforced titanium. Then after I get out, use up all but 10% of the fuel to move us as fast as possible.

It seemed simple enough, but Deekes was still having jitters. He'd never had a mission that required so little from him and at the same time so much. 16 lives were depending on him, more than he'd even known to take care of in his 20 years of life. Silently, he thanked the doctor for giving him the relaxants. It was the only thing keeping him in the command couch.

Flipping up several switches and mobilizing the Pelican, he opened the gun ports and readied to fire. A bead of sweat managed to climb down his face and hang on his nose, irritating him much too quickly, making him rub it furiously. What better time than now.

Pulling the trigger, the massive bullets started to pierce through the damaged blast doors. After several of them had made their way through, the force of the air in the room flowing out put too much pressure on the doors, breaking the connection it held to the rest of the ship. The Pelican began to float out as well, but Deekes made sure to make the engines lead the way instead of the sudden lack of air pressure. They roared for a moment, giving him that satisfying sound that hardened his heart and made him feel powerful. Being thrust back into his seat only made his ambition grow, and he pushed harder.

Radar showed no vessels around anywhere. The Slipspace countdown finished, and the smallest portal he'd ever seen opened in front of the

Pelican, around two clicks away. He slammed down hard on the gas, not wanting to be in hostile territory for a second longer than necessary, but also feeling like nothing could destroy that ship he was in.

One click. A Covenant cruiser must have noticed the Slipspace rupture, because it managed to show up on a long range scan, just 30 clicks away. No trouble at all. They're too far to even think about me. Then they opened fire.

The computer system blared loudly and alarms went off when a lone purple stream of light grew very large, very fast. It missed by a huge margin, but they wouldn't miss the next time. He only had 500 meters to go, but the ship started to glow again. Quickly setting half power to aft afterburners, he kept a close eye on the ship, waiting for it to fire so he could dodge the shot. If he was too slow, then he'd be blown out of the sky. Putting his full concentration on the ship, it fired.

Pulling the trigger to hit the afterburners gave him just enough maneuvering space to not become charred metal, and blasted him 200 meters closer. The Covenant vessel was now 20 clicks from him, and was sending out seraph fighters to pick him off. Seeing that the Slipspace portal was now only 150 meters away, he was sure that he'd make it, and that it would close behind him, but the Covenant had a knack for following any UNSC ships running from them in hyperspace. The ship seemed to grow brighter again, giving Deekes an idea.

He pushed the afterburners as hard as he could, and they flung him into the Slipspace rupture. Just as he entered, aft cameras showed the purple light hitting the opening of the Slipspace portal. A chain reaction happened that he'd never seen before, but only managed to get a short glance, as the Pelican began to shake violently and the cameras cut out. Looking straight ahead, he did everything in his power to keep the small ship keeping his universe together in one piece, but wasn't entirely sure what to do to help. So he held on to the stick for dear life, hoping it wouldn't break off.

Checking to make sure all the cryo tubes were still working, he was able to breath normally again when they all showed mint condition. The hull was beat; more than any Pelican should have been able to sustain, but it was still here, with air flowing and the engines running.

Getting back in the command couch, Deekes set the Pelican to do a constant roll, to give the ship an artificial gravity. He didn't want any of the cryo tubes to float into one another too hard and possibly break open, especially when he might not be there to assist.

With that, he gave some thought about that. What happens if something goes wrong and I'm...dead? Then what? Obviously, the Spartan had thought of this, and taken it into account. That's why everything was made foolproof, because if it wasn't then nobody would make it out alive. But now, there was nothing to do but wait.

How long will it take? Summoning several star charts and plotting his own destination, he input the data into the computer. The screen gave a blue loading menu, which stayed on for several minutes. The ship must have been banged up pretty bad. When it finally finished, he cursed silently.

October 22nd, give or take a day.

There was only enough food for a week maybe, and water for double that. There was no chance he'd survive another two weeks of that. And on top of that, there was a limited supply of air circulating through the Pelican, which he'd undoubtedly run out of before then. In despair, he started writing.

When he finished, he left the note outside the cockpit, and closed the door, sealing the hatch. Then removing the pistol from his holster, he took the gun and gave it a good look. He emptied the clip except for one bullet, and closed his eyes as he looked into it. Tears started to form, but Deekes shook them away. He didn't want to be remembered that way. Putting the bullet back in the gun, Deekes placed it in his mouth, and pulled the trigger.

All that was left was the deafness of space.

Blinking twice hard, John tried to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. Although he'd lacked sleep and food, it had never been this bad. Getting up, he let his arm down and the apparition grabbed hold of it. Hoisting him up, John still was not fully able to grasp what he was seeing. But all the Covenant personnel did.

"There it is! Kill it," yelled one enraged Elite, who held its sword high and charged the two Spartans. Quickly turning around and blocking any path to James, the Elite continued its charge, and then came to a sudden halt when a strange sound came from behind it. The white armored Elite came up to John and pointed directly at James.

"Did you not send this one to infiltrate our vessel while we had been distracted?"

"No. This Spartan was not alive...as far as I understood."

"Then what shall we do with him? He has killed our own, more than would be necessary for death in our culture. Would this be satisfactory?"

Lord Hood took a step closer. "If I may be so bold, some of your forces

are still fighting on our planet against us. Neither of them had the opportunity to find that the conflict has ended. Therefore, we have a tradeoff. Should every attacker on Earth be sentenced to death?"

The Elite gave a hard look at James, then back at Hood. "You speak with wisdom, Human. All charges against that one are to be dropped, immediately. And see to it that any of our own attacking any human will receive a punishment twice as worse than if it were against our own. Now let us proceed with these discussions."

"When the program I set finished by sending out a distress signal, my cryo tube was deactivated and I came to a couple minutes later. After getting out, I noticed a small gravity, maybe a tenth of Earth's, but it was better than nothing. But looking into all the other cryo tubes was a shock: they were all dead. I couldn't understand what had happened, then wondered if I was alive."

"You have to understand that I was very disoriented because of the lack of nutrients, and straight thinking just wasn't available for me," James said as he swallowed another mouthful of the best military grade rations he'd ever had. It was his fourth package. "I looked in every single one. They were all dead, but still somewhat frozen. At least they died in their sleep."

"The cockpit door was locked, and I needed to force it open, which was quite difficult, and upon doing so I found another body. Deekes had been dead for around a month and a half, and his body had already begun decomposing. But there were also dark blood stains attached to the walls, and a bunch of bullets littered the floor, along with a gun. Scanning the room showed a small gap in the windshield, and looking closer, it fit the size of the bullets I found. He shot himself."

"Then the atmosphere started to vent, but slower in our compartment because of the locked door. But because of the energy spent by the atmospheric systems to continue working properly, other systems power was drained, and the air inside the cryo tubes managed to escape. I only survived because of this," tapping on his almost impenetrable armor. Almost.

John watched his and the other Spartans faces during the story, and a brief feeling of grief came over him. "There was nothing you could have done." "Maybe. All that I have left from the ship is this letter," holding up a small paper, "and the names of all the marines in here," pointing to his head with a piece of food.

"When we get through all of this, we'll go to the families, let them know what happened."

“No, I’ll go. They were my responsibility, and regardless of whether I could have done anything to save them, they were under my command, and I’m to blame for their deaths. I’ll go see the families. I’m sure you’ll all have your hands full anyways. But moving on, what happened at Reach?”

The remaining Spartans looked at each other, all exchanging glances, when John spoke. “We lost Reach.”

Swallowing hard, James also scrutinized the Spartans. “So we’re all that’s left?”

“No, there’s one more. Kelly was taken by Dr. Halsey just before we reached the Cairo installation. We have no idea of her whereabouts.”

James shook his head and looked down at his food, now not hungry anymore. It was an incredible blow to him, all this at once. Reach gone, almost all the Spartans gone, Earth nearly gone, and now a ceasefire and coalition. He still didn’t understand why they’d want to work together with Humans if there was nothing left to offer. But that was something for a higher rank to answer, and he was just about ready to collapse from all the food he ate.

Admiral Hood took one step in the room and John instinctively stood straight and saluted. “Admiral on deck!” The rest of the Spartans followed. “At ease. Everything is set up, and I’ve got only one thing to give you for this mission. Of course, we never expected the treaty to go so far, but I couldn’t resist it, especially if there could be a possible conflict with other portions of the Covenant that have broken off from the core group.”

Another soldier walk in, holding something tube-like in shape and wrapped in a black cloth. He handed it over to Lord Hood, who took the cloth off the top, revealing the weapon. “Fully automatic shotgun. 20 rounds per clip, able to hold 60 rounds extra. Won’t ever jam or break down, thanks to some serious engineering done by our boys at R&D back home. There’s a full compliment of them. They all come with a full Spartan weapons cache brought over from what we had left from Reach, but I’m sure there’ll be enough for you. Feel free to take whatever you like; we’ve given all the ammo we could spare.”

“Thank you sir,” John said as he took the gun from Lord Hood, inspecting it. Truly a fine piece of equipment, he looked up. “What’s it named?”

“None. After losing a lot of our tech from the last couple civil wars, some of our people found a prototype of this, and just finished making it. The recoil is hell, and I figured that there were a few marine’s who’d be able to take it. And it’s never actually been used, so maybe the honor of giving it a name can be up to you, Master Chief.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.” The Admiral stood still, both hands behind his back, while the others looked over the new gun. “Something else, sir?”

“Yes, there is. The terms to the agreement give no indication as to when you’re mission will be finished. It may be a couple days, weeks, months,...even years. And until that mission is fulfilled, there’s nothing I can do about it. If there’s anything I can do...if there’s anyone on Earth you’d like me to give something...?”

John gave a quick look over to James, who still had the letter in his hand, and the names in his head. Spotting a pen on a table nearby, he went over and began writing the names of those marines on the Pelican with him, on the back of the letter. The rest of the Spartans had declined, and as James gave the letter over, John took it and then pen, and scribbled a few words on it. Handing it over to the Admiral, who examined it briefly, looked up and said, “Consider it done.”

“Good luck on you’re journey, to all of you,” he said as he shook each Spartan’s hands. “I can’t wish anything for you, because I already know that it will happen anyways, or simply hold you down. Therefore, I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Yes sir!” they all said in unison, saluting. Saluting back, Lord Hood turned and walked out the door, as they realized it might be the last time they see another Human in a long time. Just as he left, another being entered behind him, the white-armored Elite.

“All preparations have been made, and we will leave immediately after they leave us. Then, our journey to the ark shall begin.”

Chapter 27

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 27

1823, Oct. 22, 2552 (Personal time)/
Onboard unknown Forerunner Structure

Looking around the new surroundings, Kelly could have sworn she was back inside one of Halo's building or underground structures. The resemblance was astonishing, and she would have had trouble believing she wasn't back where they had all started if Cortana hadn't said it herself. The grey walls still surrounded the group of Spartans, who were now creating a rift inside the structure. Their green armor did not fit at all with the environment, but that wasn't their concern. "Cortana, where are we?" "Unknown. As far as I can tell, it's a Forerunner structure, and quite large. We'll need to check around for more info." Great, I could have figured that out. Looking back at the rest of the Spartans, now under her command, she took a mental note of the amount of wounded. It seemed weird, but the Spartan II's never really were wounded. In truth, any damage they had received would have killed a normal human, and they would keep fighting on, but these Spartans didn't look wounded at all and they weren't fighting.

"Cortana," Kelly said with her mic muted so only to speak to her, "What is the status of all the injured Spartans?"

"Scanning...Unknown. Their life signs are erratic, but their physical condition seems fine for the injuries I've seen you Spartans have. Only minor injuries, but something has scrambled them from the inside." Kelly thought for a moment longer, then shook her head and returned to the task at hand.

"I should mention that the Flood do release certain elements into any body that they try to take over, incorporating their genetic makeup into the potential host. Although the parasite Flood form might not survive the process, it may still go on."

"So the injured might turn into Flood?"

"There's no way to know without study, and we don't have the necessary

equipment anyways. But I might suggest leaving them behind. They will slow us down, and if they do end up turning into Flood, then we may not be prepared to take them out. This way, one or two Spartans will stay behind and keep an eye on them, and if anything goes wrong, they'll report back immediately."

Sighing, Kelly agreed. Informing the Master Chief was something she didn't want to do, but as the leader of this team, he had to know. Another Spartan ran up to her, and Kelly recognized it to be Nick. "Perimeter secure, ma'am."

"Acknowledged. Let's get back and get ready to move out. I don't want to sit around all day." The secure perimeter meant that either they were teleported in a lucky spot, or that they simply were the only ones here. The Forerunners, as far as she knew, had been dead for over 100,000 years, and if there were any truth to that, none would be here.

Coming back to the small encampment, the Master Chief walked up to Kelly and Nick. "I've got five wounded, all saying that they feel numb in their arms and legs, and can't move some parts. The suit's allow for them to move, but they have no way of knowing whether it goes or not. Dr. Halsey is giving them a full bioscan now, but she says a full analysis won't be complete for another hour, at least."

"We don't have that kind of time. Without any intel on whatever this thing is, we can't just sit around."

"Agreed. But the wounded can't come with us. I'll post a few Spartans to stay with them while the rest of us go on reconnaissance." Turning away to find the chosen few, the Master Chief looked back briefly, then came about. "I'd also like to take command again, as neither of us knows the situation and I am the highest ranked."

Giving it a moment of thought, Kelly found that she'd been waiting for him to ask. Being responsible for lives was always a burden, but when it needed quick decisions made that could be matters of life and death, she had always been too weak to handle it. Sending anyone to their grave's was always something that made her sick to her stomach, which might have been the main reason that she was never promoted. She always hesitated with those decisions, whereas John wouldn't. Kelly only hoped that the Master Chief wouldn't either. "Permission granted, Master Chief. What are your orders?"

"For the moment, stay put. We'll gather our gear together and get on the move." As he left to conclude his business, James carried several loads of equipment, and was stretched in every direction.

"Need a hand?"

The corridors were dead silent, but she pocketed the thought as a cold shiver went up her spine. "It's eerie how quiet it is here, isn't it?"

"Cortana, you read my mind. Do me a favor and only tell me the good things from now on." Cortana imitated a sigh, and quite well to, but Kelly just smiled it off, knowing that she felt no remorse. If anything, she found it funny.

Two Spartans kept the rear, three took point, and the rest made a small circle around the Master Chief, Kelly, and Dr. Halsey. Two more Spartans stayed behind with the wounded in case any trouble came their way.

"Master Chief, where exactly did the Spartan III program take place, if I may ask?" Dr. Halsey seemed enthusiastic to know, but didn't show it at all. Cortana gave Kelly the head's up.

"On Reach."

"Reach? But we were on Reach and had no idea that it was going on."

"As soon as the Spartan II program was finished, we were brought in and trained."

"And who authorized the program?"

"Colonel James Ackerson, and we were trained by Chief Mendez, if that was the next question."

"Ackerson..."

"Do you know him, Dr. Halsey," Kelly asked. The name was familiar, but she couldn't remember from where.

"Ackerson is a cold hearted bastard who would rather send other people to their deaths than himself because he thinks he's the second coming.

That's why you were sent to that Halo ring; he must have found it but knew there would be no way to find out what it was or use it unless someone he trusted could get there and find out what it was. And wanting to outdo me with my Spartan program, he set up his own and even used the same trainers, all in preparation for something like that discovery. He knew that if the mission were given with strict instructions to be reported to him, then he could get all the credit, and be the hero of the day."

Several Spartans looked at her and dismissed the comment, not really knowing enough to judge, or perhaps they didn't care. "And now, here we are..."

"We were supposed to only speak with our mission details to Colonel Ackerson, but this turn of events has changed the priorities of the mission. Our main concern should be to find a way off this thing and back to Earth, where we could actually do some good. This place seems like it's been dead forever, and there are no signs of life anywhere. James, where's the

status report from blue team?”

“We haven’t received it yet, sir.” Shifting his head back slightly, the Master Chief looked over to Kelly, then back in front.

“Permission to go check it out, Master Chief,” Kelly said just before several other Spartans had a chance.

“Permission denied. I want you here. Jessica, go back to blue team’s position and send back a signal. It may just be residual interference from the material here. If you get no response in ten seconds, head back double time.”

Giving the thumbs up, Jessica ran off and the rest of the Spartans tightened up the circle. Kelly walked a few steps in front of the Master Chief. “With all due respect, I am the fastest here. I should go.”

“No, Jessica is. As far as I heard, she ran past you when you tried to stop us from activating the ring.” So that’s who it was, she thought, remembering the incident. Well, I guess it makes sense. She is at least ten years younger than me. “Frank, if there’s something inside these walls blocking our signal, is there any way to disperse it so it travels around them?”

“None that I know of. We could use some of the cable to carry the signal through the corridors, but I don’t know that we have enough. Nick, any idea’s?”

“Well, if we set the frequencies of our messages to be at the highest frequency possible for the suits, it would increase the wavelength and power of the signal, but would need more power to use. And we’d need to test it out.”

“Sounds like a plan. We’ll try it out when we get word from Jessica. Until then, take 5 everyone.”

Kelly took the moment to inspect the M6D pistol she’d been given with her new armaments, and quickly took it apart and back together again. “Is that what you always do when you have nothing better to do?”

“I don’t generally have that luxury. Keep an eye on the motion scanners and on all frequencies. I don’t have a good feeling about this place.”

“Aye aye.” Dr. Halsey started walking away from the group, and for a moment, saw something reflecting light in between two walls. Getting closer to inspect it, she saw something glowing and shining, and was only wondering why the walls were so close together and what it was that was in between them.

Running at her top speed, Jessica heard the wind passing by her, but she knew it was just her imagination because the Mjolnir armor cut out any

sound from the outside unless she wanted to hear it. And at the speed she was moving at, the torrent of air against the massive suit would only make her shiver from the harsh sound. Just thinking about it did the trick.

It had taken the team of Spartans around half an hour to traverse through the huge complex to whatever location they were at, so she estimated around five minutes of running would get her back to base camp.

Time to think, a comfort she was rarely afforded, brought forth many questions, none of which she was able to answer because of the huge amount she had. Slowing her head down, her body followed suit mildly, dropping a few kph. What the hell is this place? And what are all these weird markings on the walls? The markings were similar on ever new pillar, although they had some slight differences in each one. They reminded her of a parking structure she'd once seen on Reach, where the area was designated by a letter and number, for people to remember where they had parked their cars. Perhaps it was the same.

Realizing she'd slowed down, Jessica picked up the pace back to her max. Although she'd been in the suit for a number of years already, it was always strange to simply run in it, because without any other actions taking place, it gave time to feel the movements. Each step went quickly and with much force, but she herself wasn't moving her legs; the suit did it. It took awhile to get used to not moving each and every muscle by themselves when the Spartans first donned the suits, but it still felt awkward to not do it, at least in this case.

During battle situations she was glad to be able to 'feel' like moving for cover and still aim and fire at the same time. It gave her an edge on anything around, because it would send the signals from her brain directly through the suit almost instantly. The added strength and speed were added benefits, along with the improved shielding systems.

Motion sensors immediately picked up contacts, although they didn't show up as friend or foe only 100 meters ahead. Slowing to a quick halt and pushing those thoughts aside, she brought about her assault rifle.

There seemed to be too much movement. Only seven Spartans had been left behind, the five injured and two additional to keep lookout. But at least ten were at the base, which definitely meant there was a problem. Just as she opened a comm. channel back to the Master Chief, something pushed her forward hard, almost making her let go of the rifle and dropping her shields completely.

A huge Flood combat form, one larger than any she had ever seen before, gave a brief look at her and paused. One arm was replaced by several very long tentacles, and one of them fizzled with static. Jessica didn't waste the

moment and opened fire, taking off the elongated arm and a leg, slowing it down too much to cause any more damage to her.

Alarms rung out in her suit as the motion sensor showed more movement behind her. Turning around, the corridor was filled with Flood combat forms. She pointed her gun directly in front, not aiming at any single target. More movement came from every direction, and in the corner of her eye Jessica spotted Flood forms crawling on the walls, some of them flying, others jumping from wall to wall. She kept walking back slowly, but they followed her, keeping the same distance.

Then shadows from around the nearest alley between the closing Flood and herself grew, and when they came out and showed themselves, Jessica's eyes widened with disbelief. For the split second that she hesitated all the Flood began their attack. Quickly dodging several lunging attackers, she turned and threw the first unfortunate Flood form she found back at its group with such force that they exploded into a pool of green ooze. Only then did she open fire and start running backwards.

"There are Flood all around here! They've completely surrounded me, and are pouring out of the walls, the ceiling, everywhere!" The seven figures that had first been her mission to find were now her attackers, firing bursts of shredder rounds into her newly rejuvenated shields. Leaping to the nearest wall for cover, she set the link between her and the rest of the Spartans to stay open.

Flood came down on her from every direction, and all in different sized. Some flew on her, but Jessica managed to keep a small perimeter around and above her clear, at least for the time being. But when the main force turned the corner and spotted her, she bolted.

Each corridor was holding more combat forms that she had never seen before, and firing at them seemed to do no good as there were simply too many. She did everything in her power to lose them, but they were in every alley, corridor, and hallway. It was as though the normally stupid Flood she'd come to know and hate had suddenly found some intelligence.

Finally, she saw a path that extended as far as she could see, and ran for it. Everything chasing her was falling behind, unable to keep up with her speed. She kept running until the lights began to dim to nothing. The suit activated her light the instant it appeared too dark for her liking, but it couldn't solve the only other problem she now faced. A dead end.

Not having enough time to stop herself, the wall ahead gave its aid, but showed no indentation from the impact. Whatever material the structure was made out of was, it was the strongest thing she'd ever encountered.

And from its grey look, it didn't appear to be metallic in any way. What the hell am I thinking about?

Motion sensors started showing more targets closing in on her fast, but stuck in the corner with no way out; she pulled out her shotgun and pumped the handle, and sent out her last message.

Then a signal broke through, and it played heavy static and loud gunfire. "There are Flood coming out of nowhere! They're everywhere, pouring out of walls, the ceiling, everywhere!" Her gun blazed on fully automatic in the background, and inhuman screams broke through the static. "There are too many of them-no escape route! They've got-don't come back-" The transmission died there.

The Master Chief immediately readied his gun. "Taylor, Nick and Sean, take point. We're going back to extract them."

"Wait, Master Chief, we can't." Kelly looked directly at him, and even though she couldn't see his face, she sensed confusion. "The Flood must have found a way to get here using the same method Cortana used. If that's true, then there could be hundreds, even thousands of them coming out of nowhere. Our first priority, as you said before, is to get out of here and back to Earth. Our chances of survival are small if we go back." Glancing back towards where he'd last seen Jessica run to, he shook his head and looked down momentarily. "Ok, double time our search. The Flood will be around soon enough, and we can't let them catch up with us, especially if we don't have our bearings straight and if we don't know where we're headed. Cortana, can you read them on long range scanners?"

"Negative. They were at least 15 clicks back, which means that it'll take them some time to find us if they take the exact route we did and we keep moving. But I'll keep an eye on it."

Getting ready to have his entire team run, the Master Chief turned and saw Dr. Halsey, and knew she wouldn't keep up. Using the suit-to-suit comm. system, he sent a quick message to Kelly, which she replied with an acknowledgement signal. Walking up to Dr. Halsey and holding her hands as though to carry the doctor, Kelly said, "May I?"

Quickly getting the drift, Halsey agreed and the team moved. After a couple minutes, Cortana noticed something on her long range motion detectors. "Wait, I'm picking up something." Instinctively, the Master Chief held up a fist and crouched down, the rest following suit. He pointed to a few Spartans and pointed where to go, then pointed for Kelly to find cover for the doctor. Cortana sent the data over to the Spartans, and the

signal was getting stronger. Soon, it showed up on their normal motion trackers.

There were many signals being displayed, but it was impossible to determine them at the current distance. A couple Spartans holding sniper rifles aimed them in the general direction of the targets, and waited for them to come out into the open. When they did, it surprised all the Spartans. They opened fire.

The targets took three sniper rounds to the chest but didn't fall. Feeling the brunt of the attack, it leapt for cover before any more shots could hit it, and the rest of the targets did the same. It was a stalemate, where both groups were safe where they were, but any movement would get them killed.

"Hey hey hey, let's back off a bit," yelled a familiar voice from across the corridor. "We're friendlies, last I checked!"

Closing momentarily, the walls that Dr. Halsey had looked through opened up, one moving in front of the other, and then vica versa. The glowing metallic network in between them had begun glowing brighter, and started to send off an encrypted signal only to certain parts of the establishment.

The walls continued, one moving in front of the other then switching places, until the corridor ended. Two walls next to the moving ones began to shift vertically, along with a small structure at the head of the moving pillar. It turned 180 degrees to the left, then to the right. Only then did a light emanate from a singular eye, and only then did the clockwork atomic gears start turning, producing, manufacturing. Time was now the foe, along with several other beings now present on the installation.

Chapter 28

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 28

1st Age or Rebirth
Aboard Preeminent Flagship Yielding Righteousness
Safe orbit around the Ark

The command staff began fulfilling their orders and the vessel slowly began moving forward, and increasing its speed. A tapestry of color and light continued blossoming from the black hole, even after it had completed doing so at first. The Arbiter watched the spectacle with much awe and reverence, yet could not comprehend how it happened or how it was possible.

“Wait!” the human named Fazio yelled out in a panic. “If we enter the black hole, it’ll destroy us all!”

The oracle moved back slightly, as though it were the head of some being and were moving it from the human’s comment. “Nonsense. We will be safe through this opening. If necessary, the personnel of this ship may even go through without the ship, as there is a localized atmosphere in this phenomenon.”

“You mean that we wouldn’t need the ship to be out in space? That we could breathe there?”

“Marine, have you ever even considered using that grey squishy stuff in between your ears?” Sergeant Johnson was not in the mood for their normal antics, although the serious look on Fazio’s face did give Johnson the impression that he was really shocked. “Or is it falling out of your ears and making you hard of hearing?”

“No sir! I heard one hundred percent, sir!” Although the humans did have a certain humor to their conversations, more pressing matters loomed about.

“Oracle, is there a docking station of some sort located at this ‘ark’?”

“Yes, there is. If you’d like, I could bring this ship to it and dock it to the first available spot.”

We would be most honored.” The Arbiter pointed to the control ahead of him, where the Zealot seated in it jumped out for the Oracle. It emitted a

paradoxically bright and dull blue light, which connected to the console. The vessel increased its speed and veered farther into the phenomenon, all of the bridge crew watching its magnificence. Several moments later, it stopped sending the electrical signal and elevated itself.

“A course has been laid in, and I’ve programmed the navigational systems onboard to dock at the first station. We will be arriving in a matter of minutes.”

The minutes passed like seconds as everyone continued to stare at the vibrant beauty surrounding them. Before anyone knew it, they had docked and several stations of the Yielding Righteousness were asking for instruction. And moments later, the portal closed, leaving them alone in the Ark.

“Please, let us make our way to the control center.” The Oracle started floating towards the door leading off of the bridge, but it didn’t open for it. Turning back to the rest, it seemed to be crying out for help. “Well?”

The human known as Johnson and another, Glusman, began laughing, although the Oracle’s situation seemed pitiful. Not a laughing matter, although the humor of the humans was still not entirely understood.

“Come, it is time. And I would rather finish as soon as possible, in case others arrive to take our place and perform their own bidding.”

Walking through the surprisingly large pathway that the Oracle led them through, the Arbiter was astonished by the architecture of the Ark. It was quite like those of both Halo’s that he had encountered, but also different at the same time. The feeling bothered him because there was no description available to explain it.

“Oracle, how long until we reach the control room?”

“At our current speed, one hour.”

“Damn, we’ve already been walking for an hour. How big is this place anyways?” The sergeant wiped his brow, although it hadn’t been sweating. Doing so was just too natural for him, simply a human characteristic.

“Using you’re standard measurement units, the radius of this facility is approximately three kilometers. It is approximately 300...” As the Oracle continued with its detailed description, one of the bridge Sangheili came to the Arbiter, and whispered quietly to him.

“Just before the portal closed, I registered another vessel behind us, although there wasn’t enough time to determine anything about it.”

“Why hasn’t this been brought to my attention earlier?” The Arbiter was distraught, one of his own Sangheili, handpicked, had delayed giving

necessary information.

“Excellency, you were discussing important matters with the Oracle of the nature of this place, and I dared not interrupt you or the holy Oracle.”

Fuming, the Arbiter smashed the Sangheili on the back of the head, throwing him onto the ground. Everyone stopped and was immediately silenced, and the downed Sangheili look up from the ground fearful of whatever lay ahead. “Do not take for a fool. I wish to keep known of all things happening, including something as important as this.” He looked back at the rest of his ship crew that had come along. “Is there anyone else who has ‘forgotten’ or simply waiting to divulge important information from me?!”

Only silence came from the crew, but the humans were now concerned. Johnson stepped forward. “Is there something wrong, Arbiter?”

“Much. This fool failed to mention that another vessel was in our midst just before we docked. We are not here alone.” Calming himself, the thoughts started to flow clearer in his mind. “Oracle, I am positive it has entered the Ark as well. Is there any way to determine what it is without returning to it?”

“Why, of course,” it chirped happily. “I’ll just scan it from here. One moment please.” Everyone seemed to edge closer to the Oracle, trying to hear better of what was to come. “Oh my. It is a Forerunner ship.”

“Then the Prophet’s are here as well, undoubtedly not far behind us. We must expedite this journey to the control center. They must not be allowed to get to it before us, or the galaxy will be theirs.”

My plan is almost complete. And this feeling, this feeling of anticipation for total and never ending power...it brings me back to my youth. The Prophet of Truth sat upon his lofty floating throne in the bridge of the Forerunner vessel, designated Truth’s Blessing. What better name than that of the leader of the Covenant.

“Excellency,” growled the Brute to his right in the gentlest voice it could,

“We will arrive at the desired coordinates momentarily. Leaving Slipspace...now.” As the view screens were flooded with the white light of the rupture, far ahead a stranger incident was occurring. The crystal in Truth’s hand began pulsing, emitting much light.

“What is that?”

“Scanners report a massive gravity well, and something that cannot be determined from this distance. Moving in closer to investigate.” The Forerunner vessel veered closer to the strange light, but in no way did Truth or any of the crew aboard feel any acceleration. There was some

extraordinary system that allowed the inhabitants of the vessel to not feel anything that actually happened to it, a feeling that Truth had never been able to get used to. In time, I suppose.

Just as they had reached the swirling mass of brilliant light, it began to collapse on itself and pull back. It continued in this fashion until there was no more. “Was an analysis taken?”

“Yes Excellency, but I fear it will not be enough. There is no way to explain the portal, although there were readings of an atmosphere within it, and that it was unaffected by the gravity well it came from.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, Excellency.” How unfortunate. They do not understand fully the controls of this advanced vessel of our lords. No matter, they will learn in time.

“The phenomenon before us, this ‘gravity well’, is obviously part of a very significant area for investigation. Especially if these coordinates were in the computer system. We were meant to find it. Now search for a way to enter, and soon the galaxy will be ours.”

Continuing along, the Arbiter was sure they were almost three fourth’s of the way there. They had increased their speed from before, although some of the lesser beings, the Lekgolo and Unngoy. The Lekgolo’s larger bodies made it more difficult to traverse for such long distances, while the Unngoy’s small stubby legs could not carry the weight of their bodies for too long of a period. They were already forced to slow down twice.

One of the Zealots was sent ahead, still in eyesight, but to make sure that the area was secure. Without knowing whether the Prophets had caught up with them or if other beings resided within the great walls, the Arbiter didn’t take any chances.

“What’s the matter marine? Put on too much excess baggage in the last couple of months?” Johnson was also sweating, and hard, too. Mendez didn’t like to be told off, even by her superiors.

“With all due respect, you don’t look so...”

“Say it, and I’ll make you run back to the ship and double time your ass back here, while we’re still moving.” Glusman, Fazio, and the other marine whom the Arbiter had not found a name for laughed heartily. “I’m sure you don’t want to be remembered as the one marine who was running while the rest of us kicked some serious ass.”

“Excuse me,” the Oracle said, “but I’m reading multiple life forms approaching us from the-” Three shots rang out, all reminiscent of the standard .50 caliber sniper rifle. Ahead, the Zealot jumped for cover, and

all could see its shields had fallen. Everyone quickly took firing positions, but hesitated, waiting for the Arbiter's command.

"Johnson, speak to them. They use your weapons, and they must be human. This is not the time or place for battle." He gave a brief nod, and then turned the corner, putting one hand over the side of his face to direct his voice. "Hey hey hey, let's back off a bit! We're friendlies, last I checked!"

Suddenly, the Oracle started turning very quickly, faster than ever before. Back and forth, it finally stopped and looked directly at the Arbiter. "What is it, Oracle?"

"They're here. And the Guardians have been activated. If that isn't enough, then we are doomed." Never having heard despair from the Oracle, a ripple of shock shot through the Arbiter. Whatever it was, it had scared the Oracle. That was not a good sign.

Chapter 29

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 29

1748, Oct. 22, 2552 (Military time)/
Aboard the Black Star

“Status report!”

“Sir, all systems are functional. Shields are down to 49%, and weapons bays 2 and 7 are empty. Structural integrity is down 12% in levels 38 through 40, and it’s under repairs right now. Three fighter squadrons are down, and there are gaps with four of the other squadrons. Scanners also indicate...something, 300 kilometers off the starboard bow.”

“I want those shields back to 100% immediately, and those fighter squadrons to be fixed. And whatever that something is, I want to know what now!” Colonel Ackerson was pissed, to say the least. His original intentions to rid of the Covenant fleet single-handedly were ruined by an additional twenty ships that came out of nowhere. The Black Star might have been the most advanced ship in existence, but it still couldn’t take on twenty Covenant warships and frigates, especially when they were fully armed and shielded.

“I’m sorry sir, whatever it is, our scanners cannot identify it. May I recommend we move in closer, to investigate?”

“Yes, do it. But don’t compromise the power being put into regenerating the shields to get us there.” Not knowing where the hell they were or what this something was only annoyed Ackerson. But he shouldn’t have expected less, choosing to use the same coordinates for the Slipspace jump...

“Sir, I’m reading that foreign ship that landed on Earth and left just before we let the nukes off. It’s inside that thing.”

“I want answers lieutenant. What the hell is that thing, and can we go after that ship?”

“I don’t know sir, to both. Our scanners aren’t sophisticated enough to penetrate it, and with the other ship in there...”

“This is the most state of the art vessel ever made, and your telling me that we can’t find out what that thing is?!”

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Shield status?!"

"Sir," a helmsman said, "we've brought it up to 61% and holding."

"Alright. Follow that ship in. Give me best intercept speed." As Ackerson felt himself being pushed into his command seat, he stared at the spectacle, somewhat amazed at what he was seeing. Watching, it twisted slowly and bloomed like a flower, over and over again. But it suddenly shuddered, and stopped blooming. The colors imbedded in it seemed to mix together into a warped pigment, and everything was collapsing. "What's happening?"

"Unknown sir."

"Dammit, I want answers! No more 'I don't know's' or 'unknowns'! I hear one more and I'll space you myself."

"Sir, it seems to be closing on itself. Recommend escape route."

"Negative. Continue on steady course." Continuing to fizzle and spurn, the mesh or light began turning clockwise, opposite its normal course. It intensified, until the light seemed to pull away from the Black Star.

"What's going on?"

"The vortex seems to be moving away from us."

"I can see that! Engineering, give me full speed!"

"Sir, we're already pushing this ship's engines to their max. Any more and they'll burn up." Only moments later did the light disappear to nothing but a small dot, then into the blackness of space. Warning lights began to flicker on and off in the bridge, and alarms sounded. "Sir, a massive gravity well is in directly in front of us. If we fall in, we won't be able to survive."

"Show me on the tactical display." The Black Star appeared as a black triangle, with a huge circle several hundred kilometers wide representing the gravity well. What the hell is that, Ackerson thought. "Divert all power to reverse thrusters and give me full burn." Several g's forced everyone back out of their seats as the ship pulled back as hard it could. Ackerson heard the groans of several of the bridge crew, as they were forced into their consoles. The ship kept pulling back hard, and the gravity only increased as they drifted closer to the gravity well. "Full starboard thrusters! Bring her about and give me everything you've got!"

Why must I do everything myself? Damn, I wish I had Araquel to fly this ship, instead of these dimwitted marines. The gravity eased off, and the ship slowed to a static orbit around the gravity well. "Sir, we are clear of danger."

"You have a knack for saying the obvious, you know that? Now, what happened to that light and the ship?"

The bridge crew exchanged quick glances, none of them knowing what to say, but also knowing what not to say. One helmsman turned her chair around to the Colonel. "Sir, I believe the 'portal', if it may be called that, closed. Whatever ship that was, it had some kind of access into the gravity well, something that we have been unable to find."

Jumping out of the captain's seat, the crew seemed to jump back with him, frightened of what may be next for them. "Does everyone here have some reason for only telling me the things I can figure out on my own? Is there some kind of conspiracy to make me feel like a complete idiot?" Pacing the bridge past two officers at semicircle consoles, they all held their breath until he passed. "Here's something I'd like explained. What is that gravity well? Usually, we can see whatever causes such things, but as we can all see, there's nothing there."

"Sir," the brave helmsman said, "I believe that it is a black hole.

Everything that we're picking up on it seems to indicate it, although we have no proof that it is one. It could be anything, but if I had to guess..."

"An interesting idea. A black hole..." Ackerson started pacing again, cross armed and head down. "Well, there had to be some way that they got through that portal. Scan on all frequencies possible, and search for anything. If this is a black hole, maybe the key to getting inside is still circling it, and just waiting to fall in. Let's grab it before it's gone."

Everyone got back to their consoles and started typing furiously, not eager to see an upset Colonel. Another alarm sounded off, and the bridge filled with commotion. "Sir, Slipspace ruptures off the port bow! I read five Covenant warships!"

"You" –pointing to one of the marines behind his command seat, "find that frequency. Plot an intercept course and warm up all batteries. Battle stations."

John looked over his Spartans, as well as Commander Keyes and the three marine fighter pilots. For a moment he wondered whether they would be prepared for the coming battles, if they could be counted on like he relied on his Spartans. Commander Keyes was a definite yes, although the three others he wasn't so sure about.

Helstrum sat steady, one leg on top of the other, keeping an eye on John. From the look in his eyes, he was sure that they could count on him. The woman, Jan, was shaken up pretty badly. But being stuck out in space with no means of communication or outside help for any period of time was nerve racking, to say the least. As long as she held up, there wouldn't be a problem.

Sach worried him. The kid was timid, scared, and worrisome. It didn't matter how good the he was in his ship, chances were that he wouldn't have the luxury of taking it out. John knew that Helstrum would keep a tight lookout over his team, but John had to make sure that they couldn't be compromised by him.

The large chamber they sat in was not exactly accommodating. There were no chairs or beds of any kind, only two benches that lined up along two walls that ran perpendicular to the door. The Covenant seemed to think quite highly of such treatment, thinking it as a high honor. There would be no complaints.

"The Covenant that we know of consisting of Elites, Hunters, and Grunt's are now to be called the Preeminent, and are allies," John read aloud.

"Brutes, Jackals, Drones and Prophets will remain named Covenant, and are to be considered hostile. Any Preeminent equipment necessary will be to our disposal, although they are limited. Firing at any Preeminent forces will be considered treason and will be punished with death on sight."

"So no 'accidental' friendly fire. Got it." Helstrum smiled and looked around, and didn't seem to care if anyone laughed. Jan and Sach gave a courtesy chuckle, while the rest didn't give it a second thought.

"The treaty," John said, continuing, "states that after the Covenant threat is dealt with, the human race will be given the choice to join the Preeminent. As of now, we are under their protection for the destruction they've caused, but once this is through, we're either with them or on our own. As a gesture of good will, exchanges in technology, personnel and other things will be allowed, thus open trade. And the list goes on." Going over to the bench where the rest of his Spartans sat, John joined them, and placed the readout next to him.

"It's all happening so fast," Keyes whispered. The rest looked over at her, and agreed inwardly. "Changes like this are necessary, I guess. For one, I'm thankful."

"Agreed," James pitched in. He had the most to be thankful for, surviving all this time, while everyone else around him died in more than one instance. Even though John may have gone through a more physical hell, it was James who endured being alone, failing to save anyone, and the guilt of their deaths. Perhaps he had the more challenging struggle.

"So...what happens after all this is through? The war and all?" Helstrum didn't give the question to anyone particular, but simply wanted to hear an answer. The Spartans all thought about it. They'd been trained for war, and all their lives there was war. But when there was no more fighting, then what?

The doors to their room opened and a Grunt ran in, jumping with excitement. "Masters request you at the bridge immediately! Quick, follow!" If any time had been allowed to find humor in the little thing, then everyone would get a good laugh, but this was not the place or time. Something was up.

"Commander, the vessel is the same one that left when we entered the Holy world's space."

"Interesting. Keep enough distance from it so they cannot fire upon us. And bring the humans here. They must be spoken with before taking action against this new predicament." The Supreme Commander scrutinized the unknown vessel, but was unable to determine anything from it. "I have never seen a ship of that classification. Scan it."

"Scanning...Commander, I do not believe our scanners can penetrate that vessel's hull. Preliminary scans show nothing. It has set an intercept course for us."

"Match it and keep our distance the same." The bridge doors opened and the human's entered. They came in quietly and awaited instruction. "Do any of you recognize this vessel?"

All of them turned to the view screen and examined it, and three of the humans pushed through for a closer look. "Yeah, I've seen that ship before. It's one of ours."

"Excellent. Then you may contact it and inform them of the new treaties, and they will join us."

"Wait," John cut in, "I've never seen that class warship before. What is it?"

"I don't know, sir. When we were out there fighting, a huge EMP blast knocked most of our ships out, and a lot of theirs as well. I came out fine, and that ship came out of nowhere, destroying anything that moved. They were ours, but I don't know anything more than that except for the Super Mac cannon in it, and that it has three regular Mac cannons on it as well, including a huge complement of fighters and an array of weaponry that we've never seen before."

"This will only help end the struggle faster. Contact them, and there will be no fighting." The Commander typed a few keys on a console near them, then nodded to the humans. John stepped forward.

"This is Spartan -117 to the UNSC attack ship. Please respond."

A moment of silence passed by, giving the Preeminent ship an eerie feeling, when a response broke through the silence. "Human traitors, this is the Black Star, the most advanced warship in existence. I, Colonel

Ackerson, order your Covenant ships to stand down and be boarded immediately, or be destroyed for crimes against the human race. I repeat, surrender or be destroyed.”

Looking back at his Spartans and the marines, they all were clueless how to respond. The message left them dumbfounded, all thought simply stopping for a moment. John felt as though his brain shut down and restarted, and waited a second for it to reboot. “Why do these humans call you traitors?”

“Unknown. I’ll find out now. Black Star, we are not traitors. I repeat, we are not traitors. A treaty has been made with the Covenant, and we are currently at peace with one sect. Stand down and do not engage. We will not open fire.”

“You leave me no choice, Spartans. I knew from the start that Dr. Halsey was wrong for the job, and now I’ve been proven right. No treaties have been made; you’ve sided with the enemy, seeing that the human race was going to fall. But you were wrong, weren’t you? And now, I, Colonel James Ackerson, sentence all traitors and their allies to death for the highest crimes against humanity. May God have mercy on your souls. Open fire when ready.”

The bridge of the vessel began to stir as the crew converged on their consoles, determining possible attack vectors and defensive positions for their fleet. John finally was able to think again, and desperately needed a plan. “Commander, with the firepower that Helstrum said, can these five ships take on the Black Star?”

“We lack the necessary information. He stated that more armaments were in its arsenal, although they are not known to us. Therefore, we cannot know.”

“Ok, are there boarding ships here?”

“Yes, there are boarding craft available. Stay out of the Black Star’s range and send our boarding party along with a few others, all being covered by any fighter craft you have. We’ll go in and take control of it.”

“Are you sure that is wise? If it is faster than our forces, it will be fired upon, and possibly destroyed.”

“It’s our best chance, as long as we don’t know what its true capabilities are. Send several decoy boarding craft out and we’ll all take one. In the meantime, split up; make it go for one ship at a time. Give us the time we need and we’ll send you a communiqué when we’ve gained control.”

The last time John had been inside a Covenant boarding craft was back on the Cairo before finding the second Halo ring. And it was only to take out

a few targets that he didn't want the marines to miss, so he didn't get a good view of it. This was as close up as he'd ever wanted to go.

Drifting in space with only four other Spartans, John couldn't help but not be at ease. Being in space with no protection or knowing what was going on and being helpless was the worst thing for anybody. A necessary evil, he reminded himself. Each trip like this he'd wished was the last, but it never seemed to be. Looking at his Spartans, he knew that they all thought the same thing.

Sending the Seraph fighters to protect the decoy's only was a daring move on his part, but he knew if anything from the description attacked their boarding craft, a couple of fighters wouldn't have helped. But at the moment, he just hoped that they wouldn't pick up on their plan.

Holding only state of the art weaponry and too much ammunition for this mission than any of them wanted, John tried to think of a way to not kill anyone. All he needed to do was take control of the bridge and force them to stand down, at least for a short time while the rest of the fleet got into position to board safely and stop any further problems.

If at all possible, maybe only Ackerson felt that the Spartans were traitors, and the rest of the crew was just afraid to disobey his orders. John knew how fear played a large part in any such role, unless the crew was completely loyal to his cause. But he highly doubted that, because Ackerson's cause was selfish and not very logical, while his own provided a path to survival for anybody on board with the brainpower to comprehend it and listen.

Under strict orders, only pistols and assault rifles with good accuracy were allowed on this mission. He didn't want any death's that could be avoided, so no shotguns, rocket launchers, grenades, or sniper rifles. Linda argued at first, but he reminded her that the sniper rounds could knock off any limb she aimed at, and that was also too much for his taste.

The boarding craft attached itself to the hull and pushed all the Spartans into one another briefly, all of them giving a sigh of relief. They quickly worked to cutting a hole in the hull of the ship, which was completely black. No ship ever seen or made had been black, mainly because the UNSC had always wanted ease with seeing their own ships. This, however, was the exception to the rule.

The cutting tools were standard for any boarding craft, but they didn't seem to work completely against the hull of this ship. Pushing it harder did no good, so they threw it in the back of the boarding craft, and started beating the hull. If it was stronger than their MJOLNIR armor, then there was no chance for the Covenant fleet, and they would have to find another

way in.

It finally started to give way when James kicked it, and the rest followed suit quickly. Soon, it was bent in such a way that they were able to grab the middle and pull it out, thus cutting a small portion of the hull and spreading it out from the middle. When they made it large enough for any of them to get through, they piled out.

Scanning the interior of the ship showed nothing out of the ordinary. It looked like a standard UNSC warship, although some of the tech seemed updated. They were in the air filtration room, and plants littered it. "Looks like we can take a breath of fresh air," James joked.

"Radio silence from here out. Hand signals only. Fred, Will, you have point. Linda, watch the rear. Let's go." Closing in on the doorway out, motion sensors detected lots of movement outside of it. They must be looking for us. But there was only one exit out of the room, and they were all too large in their armor to crawl through the air ducts. After a few minutes, there was only one blip on the motion sensor, and John decided it was time to go. Crouching walking towards the door, it automatically opened, but none of them left the room.

Motion sensors showed the blip moving closer to inspect the open door. When John spotted a man peeping his head through, they grabbed him and threw him inside, then cleared the door so it would close. "How do we get to the bridge?"

"There's no way I'm telling you traitors!"

Linda took a step closer. "Maybe you'd like to tell a lady?" He gave her a look that could kill, and she returned the favor. She grabbed his index finger and broke it in three places. Will covered his mouth as he screamed. "Now will you tell me, or do I have to make sure that this entire hand will never be used again?"

Now breathing very hard and sweating, the man's eyes darted left and right, looking for a way out. Linda grabbed another finger and was about to squeeze when he screamed "Okay, okay! Go up ten levels and past four doors. There's a special elevator to it there, but only bridge crew can activate it."

"That's better." Linda smiled, then tapped the man on the head, which had enough force to give him a concussion, but it was difficult to accomplish lighter movements with the suit. He dropped, and Will laid him on the ground. No blips showed up on their motion sensors, and they left the room, and followed the instructions given.

For a moment, John thought that the marine could have been lying, but looking back at the memory of his face, he thought against it. Only the

hardest marines wouldn't crack from such torture, something that no Spartan enjoyed doing, but they knew it would work best with the time restraint they had.

As the boarding craft left, the five Covenant warships split up, each keeping a large distance from the Black Star. It was not normally the way of Sangheili to withhold themselves from a fight, but more important matters rested upon their shoulders. It was enough that time was being wasted here, instead of being at the Arbiter's side.

The Supreme Commander looked at the trajectory of the human ship, and saw its desired target. The Faith was not fast enough to keep the humans at bay, and would soon be destroyed. A difficult choice awaited the Commander: Allow one of his vessels to perish to possibly save the rest, with no honor, or to attack with all the ships in his command and have a greater chance of death, but have an honorable one.

There had never been an instance in which his command would cause others to die without honor. A confusion he had never felt clouded his mind and memories of the past came to him. It had only been many revolutions before that such an error had caused him to lose his upper left mandible. The memory of returning to his home with the mark of shame had caused him to hide in seclusion for too much time. It was his life and the life of his team, or their honor and imminent death. His error had cost him the mandible, and the shame to his family.

I will not err again. "All vessels, prepare to engage the human ship. Target weapons systems and engines if possible. But destroy it if necessary." The Faith turned around and opened fire on the Black Star, whose shields blocked the plasma bolt. It then fired a single round that tore through the Faith's shields and its hull, utterly destroying the vessel.

The four others began to converge on the Black Star, which opened fire on the rest. Blue light streamed from it in a familiar color and pattern, and when it connected to the shields, the Commander knew why it was so. It resembled their own plasma rifle. The shields of the vessels dropped like those of his own armor against such fire. "Bring us about. Fire volley's from generators one and four."

Plasma filled the sky and found its target, but still couldn't penetrate its shields. It fired all three of its Mac cannons at the Birthing Soul, which was left dead in space only moments later. Salvo's of missiles streaked from the Black Star onto all of the Preeminent vessels and struck them all, making them know that they were not forgotten. The Commander now thought whether his decision was right, but he dismissed it almost immediately.

Instead, his thoughts turned to a successful mission to his new allies.

Nobody had spotted the Spartans yet, and they climbed up eight levels already. It was starting to seem more and more like a trap, but remembering Ackerson from the questioning John received after his mission on Cote D'Azure, Ackerson might still be arrogant enough to make a trap for them on the bridge, where they wanted to be. They continued on, and at the tenth level, the motion sensor showed at least ten targets, all patrolling the area, walking back and forth.

From what they knew, there was no other way around. Pointing at the door leading into the hallway with the guards, John looked back at his team and took out a pistol. They all followed suit. He made sure nobody was using the exceedingly powerful M6D pistol, even though he had it holstered. The M6C was enough for their purposes.

As the doors opened, Fred and Will took down the first three guards, shooting only for their gun hands. James and John stepped out and took two more down keeping their aim high and for no vitals. When the marines opened fire however, it was with fully automatic weaponry. Jumping for cover back in the corridor from which they came and on the opposite side, the Spartans took turns looking over and placing a single shot at any given target. When the area was clear of all hostiles with weapons, the marines started to attack head on.

Knowing that any hand to hand combat would result in immediate death, the Spartans simply ran past them and headed for the elevator to the bridge. Spotting the round lowered elevator, they all reloaded their pistols one at a time and stepped in. Fred keyed the console, which immediately denied him access to the bridge. He typed on it more, then turned and looked at everyone else.

Not knowing what to make of it, Fred simply smashed the console to the microprocessors from which it was made, and the system's failsafes started working, elevating the lift. As it reached the top, each Spartan held out their pistols at arm height, and realized that it was a trap.

At least twenty marines carrying the new SB73's aimed directly at the Spartans, and Ackerson turned the Captain's chair, showing himself.

"Drop your weapons, and you won't be fired upon." A devilish smile came through Ackerson's face, and the Spartans let go of their pistols. But when they hit the ground, they all spread out and attacked the marines. James grabbed the closest one and bent her gun in half, then threw her into another. Linda hit and broke one's femur, then grabbed his gun and fired two rounds into another's arms. Fred managed to smash two marines into

each other and knock them both unconscious while head butting another behind him. Will was more creative, catching a bullet fired at him and throwing it into the firing marine's hand, then stomping on his foot, and using his other hand to squeeze the arm of another marine.

John focused on Ackerson, running after him and pushing any marines out of his way. A few still able marines fired at him and dropped his shields, and John grabbed the M6D and downed them quickly, then shot a round into Ackerson's leg. By the time he reached the fallen Colonel, the rest of the bridge was clear of hostiles, and only the original bridge crew was still there.

"Open a channel on all F-band frequencies. We have taken the Black Star, and she is non-hostile. I repeat, she is non-hostile. Recall all fighters and cease fire. This ship is now under my control, effective immediately."

"They won't listen to you, Spartan!" Ackerson turned over and tried to get up, but failed and crawled away from John slowly. "This crew is loyal to me, not to your treasonous rampage. Three of your ships have already been destroyed, and there's only two left to take down."

"Actually sir, you're only half right." A marine at the helm stood up and walked over to John and Ackerson. "Thank you Master Chief for ridding of this problem. What orders do you have, sir?"

"No, no no no no," Ackerson jumbled, shaking his head and repeating himself. "You're a treasonous snake too, aren't you lieutenant. Then you can burn with the rest of them!" He pulled out a pistol and pulled the trigger, but John had managed to get in the way of the bullet, which fell to the ground after hitting his shields. Ackerson kept firing until John was right on top of him and grabbed his right hand which held the gun.

Turning his hand around, the gun now pointed at Ackerson, and John placed it right at his head. Ackerson resisted, but it was no use against the Spartan's strength. He pushed the barrel of the gun right into Ackerson's forehead. "Give me one good reason you shouldn't pull this trigger."

A cold sweat broke out on Ackerson's face, and John's temperature scanners seemed to show an increase of heat down by his crotch area, which began to cool quickly. "Court martial?"

"Good idea. Get him off the bridge and into the brig, lieutenant."

"Right away, sir."

"Report?"

"Sir, shields are failing at 17%. Engine systems are down to 36%, and weapons systems five through eight are down. Fighter squadrons are down 50%. And we've managed to find the signal sent by the unidentified ship that entered the gravity well."

Unidentified ship? Signal? “Show me.”

The tactical display gave a video recording of the triangular Forerunner ship he’d been on only a short time ago. It entered some portal, one he’d never seen before. “Explanation for the signal.”

“Unknown. I believe it’s how they activated the portal to be opened to travel through.”

“If that’s so, sent it directly into the gravity well. Then tell the rest of the fleet to follow us in.”

“Signal away sir. Plotting course as soon as portal opens.” A few moments later, a magnificent light took over every monitor on the bridge. The colors astounded everyone, stunning even the Spartans. Linda walked down next to John and held on to the handlebar in front of the captain’s chair.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. He couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 30

By Sir_Brilliant

Chapter 30

2021, Oct. 22, 2552 (Personal time)/
Onboard unknown Forerunner Structure

Johnson? Looking back at the Spartan III's, Kelly was almost too shocked to speak. "Hold your fire. They're human." They kept their aim until the Master Chief nodded. "Cortana, confirm."

"There are several humans there, but I also detect a large number of Covenant forces with them. I don't know what could be causing them to keep the humans with them, but it could be a trap."

"Noted. Stay here, watch my back. If anything goes wrong, give 'em hell. Otherwise, wait for the all clear." Receiving the acknowledgement signal from the Master Chief, Kelly stood from her cover and walked towards the intersection between the two encampments. Golden light shined bright over the area, illuminating a large area only from reflecting off the walls. Even though they did not appear metallic, the placement of each pillar had to be ingeniously done; making a small light source spread to an area at least five times what it should.

Sergeant A.J. Johnson made his way to Kelly, who stared in disbelief. In the back of her mind, questions formed faster than she could handle. How did you get here, did you reach Earth, what happened there...She struggled to keep her mind focused, and reminded herself of the one most important question for the moment.

"Glad to see you, Chief," Johnson said as he stood straight and saluted. She returned the salute, and peered closer.

"Sergeant, what are those Covenant soldiers doing with you? Have you been taken prisoner?"

"Not at all, ma'am. There's a truce at the moment, and as far as I know, a treaty should have been written out and signed by now. We're at peace with the Covenant. Or at least a part of them." His words struck like a bullet, but in a good way.

Taking a moment to let it sink in, she realized that there had to be proof.

Without her external speakers on, she asked Cortana, “What do you think?”

“Bio-spectral analysis shows that he’s not lying, but he could be a very good liar. In either case, I doubt he’d want to hide that from you. As for the Covenant making peace with us, I’d also be pretty skeptical. Nobody starts wars and fights them for over twenty years, then shows up at your front door and decides not to finish the job.”

“Agreed.” Taking a half step around Johnson, Kelly threw him another question. “Can you prove it?”

“Indeed, he can.” The deep voice rumbled behind Johnson, as a huge shadow loomed forward. It picked up its head and showed a foreign helmet, one Kelly had never seen before. The silver armor reflected light in all directions, and completely covered the entire upper body of the Elite. Between the cracks of armor was a black undercoating, blue lines streaking down certain parts of the suit. It obviously had some intense meaning behind it, although this was neither the time nor place to worry about such things.

“I am the Arbiter, leader of the Preeminent. We mean no harm, and wish for you to join us.” Kelly stared hard at the Elite, trying to determine whether it spoke the truth or not. She waved her hand back to the Spartans briefly, making sure they didn’t fire.

“Cortana...?”

“Well, if it is their leader, then he’s probably telling the truth. We’ve never encountered any mind-alterations or anything that could result in the change in the sergeant’s behavior, but other than that, I have no idea.”

Thinking gave her no justice, so Kelly looked for guidance from somewhere, anywhere. John would have known what to do, she thought. But glancing back at Johnson, he gave her a reassuring nod, showing her that he understood the situation from her perspective.

“Alright. I believe you. Spartans, all clear.” After a few seconds, they started to pile out, all heading towards the center but still carrying their weapons pointed and ready. She looked back at the Arbiter and stared into its large brown eyes. An overwhelming feeling of strength seemed to emanate from them, and Kelly immediately trusted him.

The Master Chief came right up to the three of them, lowering his assault rifle and switching it to his left hand. “I am the Master Chief, leader of this operation.”

“Wait, what are you talking about,” Johnson cut in. “The Master Chief is on Earth.”

“No sergeant, this is the Master Chief of the Spartan III project.” Dr.

Halsey came out from the shadows with the last of the Spartans, giving Johnson a face that was confused, excited, and shocked. His eyes widened and wrinkles appeared on his forehead, leaving a gaping mouth. "Don't worry sergeant, it'll all be explained in good time. Master Chief, I suggest we make this a walking conversation."

"Agreed. Arbiter, it's an honor to meet you, although we'll have to cut introductions short. We've been running from Flood that managed to follow us here, and we don't have any time to spare."

"I can't understand Elite facial patterns," Cortana whispered to Kelly, "but if I could, I'd bet that he's making the same face as Johnson."

Snickering briefly, the entire Covenant force began piling out, all moving at top speed after another floating orb, like the one she'd seen on the Halo ring. This one was blue, and stopped to look at her and the rest of the Spartans for a moment, then continued on. Interesting...

"Come, if the Flood have followed us here, then two forces will be fighting against us. The Prophet's are behind us, and may catch up if we do not move with haste." The Arbiter clutched his energy sword, obviously enraged by the thought of Flood and the reminder of another enemy, but eased off after a few seconds.

The Master Chief began to send his Spartans to various portions of the larger group, mainly keeping them at point. They all knew that the Hunter's and Grunt's would be able to hold off any attack long enough for the Elites and Spartans to give support, so it was there where they were needed. "Kelly, stay with Dr. Halsey. Make sure she's safe."

"Yes sir. Dr. Halsey, if you will..." Kelly lent a hand and led her to the center of the newly formed strike team, where it would hopefully be the safest. With the amount of firepower surrounding her, if it wasn't, then there was no safe place to be.

Surrounded by Brutes, the normal wonder Truth felt for them was dulled by the magnificence of the crystal. Its power was unmatched; truly the greatest of all the Lords' creations. Rummaging through the folds of his holy garments, he brought forth a container carrying the remains of the last crystal. They both began to brighten and dull weakly, showing a connectivity they held to each other. Astounding.

The shattered crystal carried certain properties which allowed for an intensified travel through Slipspace, where the time to destinations not only decreased, but also turned back. It enabled the user to go back in time through Slipspace, thus giving a power like no other. Unfortunately, the human filth had managed to destroy or otherwise dispose of a large portion

of the holy crystal, thus disabling its function and Truth's original intent. No matter. If the scriptures are true, then I shall soon see the past.

Teachings of the holy crystals were found by the Prophets on several worlds that had been investigated, giving the locations of the holy worlds and directions of using the crystals. One had already been lost by the hands of the Demons, while the second only left a small portion. Truth made sure that the last one was not compromised, and made sure to find it before the Demons could. If they did, all might have been lost.

Truth marveled in the ignorance of the humans, as they had been unable to grasp the power behind the two crystals they had found. Incomprehensible, he thought to himself. But he also thanked the Lords, for if they had used the crystals, he may never have been born.

One of the crystals gave a slight vibration, and upon inspection, Truth's eyes widened. "Halt. The opposition lies ahead." Truth couldn't explain how he knew this, but the crystal found on Earth had somehow directed him to the conclusion, and he was fully confident in it.

"Excellency, are you sure? Perhaps I should send a drone to investigate?" The commanding Brute, Diretrus, had originally come to Truth to be the replacement for Tartarus. To find whether he was worthy or not, Truth asked one question: "What makes you believe you will fulfill his duties better than he could?"

His reply was simple. "Tartarus was a weak fool, who merely found himself at the right place at the right time. His faith stemmed from ignorance and his strength from the Fist of Rukt, which he wielded like a child. Now he has failed, where I will not." This answer had great meaning to Truth, who agreed that Tartarus' faith was not from intelligence, and promoted Diretrus immediately. From that point on, everything had moved much more smoothly than he had anticipated. Now, however, was no time to question.

"No Diretrus, they are there. And sending anything may cause them to search faster, and possibly find the secrets before we do. This cannot be allowed. Find a path around them."

Diretrus held an electronic map, programmed by the ship itself. They had used it to navigate to the control center, and Diretrus tapped it several times. "A new course has been plotted. I will lead the way."

"Excellent. Bring us to it before them, and rewards that cannot be comprehended will be yours."

"Of course, Excellency," he said bowing slightly, then running ahead. The rest followed suit, and soon they would reach their destination.

“Oracle, how soon until we reach the control center?”

“We are almost there. Only a few more corridors to go.” The Oracle sounded genuinely worried, which hadn’t changed from the moment they first encountered the additional Demons.

Humans.

The Arbiter was still adjusting to the change of nomenclature used for his old enemies, his new allies. He knew that they were much more powerful than either the Unngoy or Lekgolo were, or at least the ones they called ‘Spartans’. They had overcome every obstacle placed in front of them...killing the Prophet of Regret even with the Honor Guards present. It was a dazzling display of tactics and power.

Regardless, he still felt that they were just as powerful as any Sangheili, although most they had fought against lacked the training to defeat such a foe. He held no doubts about himself, but this was not the time or place to think of such things.

A large room came to his vision in the distance, extensively illuminated, and their target. His legs began to push harder, picking up speed and bringing him to the room first. But awe stopped him, allowing the others to catch up. And when they saw the room, the same feeling grasped them.

It was much larger than he thought from the distance he originally saw it from. But now inside it, the full depth of the interior had taken over him. One Spartan made its way to the front, and didn’t stop when it reached it like the rest had. He recognized it to be one of the original ones, but only from a slight color differentiation. “Humbling, isn’t it?”

“Quite.” Everyone turned to see where the oddly familiar and sinister voice came from, and was shocked when they saw. In a hovering chair sat the Prophet of Truth, surrounded by Jiralhanae, Kig-yar, and Yamne. All the Preeminent forces opened fire on them, and a wave of plasma burned the air to reach its desired target. It splashed in an odd semicircular path around the opposition’s location, but all continued to fire. After a period long enough to cut through the crust of certain planets, the Arbiter called for a ceasefire.

A few moments passed while the last of the plasma attached to its target, when they were all greeted with shock. The Prophet and his minions stood just as before, completely unharmed, with a strange yellow glow surrounding them. “I’d suggest you forego wasting more ammunition, for nothing will pierce this energy shield. It was built by those Lords who have designed this magnificent place.”

They continued to venture farther into the room, but the Arbiter stayed put, watching the Prophet move like a God across the enchanted room. “They

call this place the ark. Do you know why? Because this is the one place our Lords kept sacred from the Flood infestation, the one place they may survive in until the reign of those disgusting beasts would end. So they waited here, for years. Thousands and thousands of years..."

"But time was against them, just as it was against you now. Because there is nothing that can be done to stop me, as long as I hold this in my possession." The Prophet waved a large crystal, about the size of his hand. "Don't worry, there is no way to reach it unless I deactivate the protective field around me, which I have no intention of doing. The only question on my mind is this: Should I allow you all to stay and watch the most glorious of all ceremonies take place, or has becoming traitorous animals taken that honor away from you?"

As the Prophet continued his monologue, motion sensors detected movement to the immediate left of the Arbiter. He kept a steady eye on the Prophet, but quickly glanced over to the position of the movement, which stopped momentarily. A green helmet came into view, followed by a Sangheili's white helmet. It instantly registered in the Arbiter's mind whom had arrived and a grin came to him, but he dared not show it.

"Believe it or not, this quandary has been a difficult one, and much time has been spent debating it. However, I do not come unprepared, and have an answer ready for you. Therefore, prepare for the-" A shadow loomed over the Prophet's head, and when the Arbiter looked at it, memories had piled high. How can it be? Halo was destroyed??

The Prophet of Truth looked up to see what was happening, but the expression he displayed was not seen. "Oh dear," said 343 Guilty Spark. "I believe it's started." Only then did the Flood come.

The Ark Story-Sir_Brilliant
Halo/Halo 2 Franchise-Bungie-Microsoft
PDF-halominister7